

**Disclosing Traumatic Thresholds in Humbert Humbert's
Discourse:**

On Trauma, Nostalgia, and Melancholy in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955)

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Master's Thesis in English Literature and Culture

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University of Bergen

November 2022

Sammendrag på Norsk

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg *Lolita* (1955) av Vladimir Nabokov. I denne oppgaven undersøker jeg hvordan hovedpersonen Humbert Humbert uttrykker seg i sin memorerer. Jeg argumenterer at fortellingen hans er påvirket av traume, nostalgi, og melankoli, og at han er ikke klar over det. Det første kapittelet diskuterer hvordan Humbert Humbert sin diskurs er påvirket av traume, og analyserer hvordan han misforstår sin utnyttelse av Dolores «Lolita» Haze. Det andre kapittelet handler om nostalgi, og undersøker hvordan nostalgi inspirerer ham å skrive om Lolita. I det siste kapittelet diskuterer jeg Humbert sitt forhold til melankoli, og argumenterer at han forlenger melankoli ved hjelp av sin innbilning. Min analyse av teksten viser at traume, nostalgi, og melankoli diskuteres sjelden når det gjelder Humbert Humbert. Derfor hovedmålet er å vise at disse tre fenomenene er viktige for å forstå Humbert Humbert sin karakter på en ny måte.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, to my supervisor prof. Lene Marite Johannessen – thank you for your invaluable feedback, for your support and understanding, and, more importantly, for your confidence in this project. Our discussions have always been a great source of inspiration.

To prof. Željka Svrnjuga – thank you for your encouragement and your interest in the early stages of this thesis, and for your eagerness to listen and to engage in conversation. I appreciate your wisdom and your thoughtfulness.

To my husband, Florin - thank you for your patience and your unfaltering trust in me. Your support means everything.

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1 Introduction

“The people of this town are god-fearing, church going, and we resent the fact our town has been tied in with the title of a dirty, sex-filled book that tells the nasty story of a middle-aged man’s love affair with a very young girl” (Wells 2015, par. 2). The year was 1959, the author of the petition – a deacon of the local First Baptist Church, R.T. Walker, and “our town” in question - Lolita, Texas, originally named in honour of Lolita Reese, the granddaughter of a Texas patriot. What caused Walker to petition the government, rally Lolita’s citizens, and request to change the name of the town? In 1958, half a year prior to Walker’s official inquiry, G. P. Putnam’s Sons published Vladimir Nabokov’s controversial novel titled *Lolita* in the United States. *Lolita* turned out to be an overnight success, becoming No. 1 bestselling novel in the country (Lawrenson 92). Unsurprisingly, the subject matter of the novel – thirty-seven-year-old Humbert Humbert’s fetishization of a twelve-year-old Dolores “Lolita” Haze – provoked a heated debate in the US. While some critics and reviewers appreciated Nabokov’s masterpiece for its aesthetic style, others maintained that “this vile book” (ibid.) should be prohibited from further dissemination. Amid such heated discussions, Walker presented his petition to Lolita’s “god-fearing” citizens. However, the outcome was far from what the deacon hoped for: not only had the town kept its original name, but instead of vanishing into oblivion, “Lolita” became a household name and an aesthetic staple in American culture.¹

In the decades that followed the publication of Nabokov’s novel, *Lolita* has remained a challenging novel to read and interpret. Full of puns, allusions, and metaphors, *Lolita* has offered its readers the ambiguity of aesthetic pleasure mixed with its thematic controversy – a dichotomy, which fundamentally baffled Nabokov. For him, *Lolita*, just like any other work of fiction, existed as an “aesthetic bliss,” fulfilling an emotion and “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (Hayman 76). Amid accusations and debates on *Lolita*’s pornographic nature, Nabokov contended that *Lolita* is “just a story, a fairy tale, as all stories are” (MacGregor 22). Yet, in spite of Nabokov’s insistence on *Lolita*’s aesthetic separation from its thematic implications, the novel’s subject matter has consistently returned to the fore of critical interpretations. In many critical readings, Dolores figures as the focal point of the

¹ One might consider here *Lolita*’s impact on American popular culture: from novels to movie adaptations, to music, to fashion statements, e.g., heart-shaped sunglasses and summer dresses, deemed “lolitaesque” in style; or the fact that the name itself, “Lolita”, has become an eponym, denoting “a precociously seductive girl” (“Lolita,” *Merriam-Webster*).

novel – she is a victim of sexual abuse, neglect, and mistreatment. The acknowledgement of Dolores’ traumatization at the hands of her mentor and care-taker is crucial to the on-going debate on child sexual abuse, childhood trauma, and fetishization. Feminist critics (Kauffman, Patnoe, Pifer, qtd. in Meek 153-154) in particular challenged Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss,” claiming that it functioned more like an ethical “trap” (Kauffman qtd. in Meek 153) for readers of *Lolita*, who were inadvertently encouraged to sympathize with Humbert Humbert, and, at the same time, failed to acknowledge Lolita’s mistreatment and abuse. Such feminist interpretations have aimed to “give voice” to the near-mute Lolita, whose plight, according to feminist critics, has been unjustly misrepresented in the novel.

Likewise, many critics have been concerned with the protagonist of the novel: the narrator, memoirist, and a self-proclaimed “lone voyager” and “nympholept” (Nabokov 16) Humbert Humbert. In many critical readings, Humbert Humbert functions as *the* perpetrator and *the* abuser: his transgressive behaviour inflicts physical and mental wounds on Dolores, which he is only partially aware of. Some critics seek explanation for Humbert’s obsession with Dolores by delving into psychoanalysis (Hiatt), others contend that Humbert Humbert is an unreliable narrator (Moore), while yet others propose that he functions as a sort of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Clare Quilty’s literary double,² endowed with characteristics of an abuser and a care-taker (Meyer). Each reading (and re-reading) of the novel offers a unique approach and interpretation of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and, thus, many observations have already been made about Humbert Humbert. However, there is a potential for a more thorough analysis of his character, in particular, regarding the nature of his discourse. With this observation in mind, the present thesis argues that Humbert’s discourse is informed by, and, in turn, informs, trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy.

I want to emphasize that the present thesis is neither concerned with moral or ethical commentary on Humbert’s transgressive behaviour, nor does it aim to “psychoanalyze” the main character. Rather, it considers Humbert Humbert’s recollections written in the form of a memoir to be obfuscated by trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy. It is also important to note that this thesis does not regard Dolores’ trauma as insignificant or redundant, and does not aim to undermine it by focusing solely on Humbert Humbert. Above all, the thesis emphasizes that Humbert’s traumatic discourse chiefly negates Dolores’ status as a victim, and deliberately seeks to evoke “impartial sympathy” (Nabokov 63) from the readers.

² In the novel, Clare Quilty figures as Humbert Humbert’s rival and antagonist: a deviant playwright who seduces and takes Dolores away from Humbert.

Besides, the thesis aims to explore how Humbert Humbert, the dominating voice in the novel, shapes and moulds his past recollections, oblivious to the impact of trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy on his own discourse of the present moment. I suggest that to approach Nabokov's *Lolita* as Humbert Humbert's memoir, complicated by the three phenomena mentioned, allows for a broader understanding of how trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy inform, and, at the same time, are informed by Humbert's own narrative.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

In the present thesis, I employ the method of close reading to analyse Humbert Humbert's discourse in the novel. Here, the primary source for understanding trauma comes from literary trauma theory and trauma studies, taking into account Cathy Caruth's remarks on the *belatedness* of trauma and Erin McGlothlin's discussion of the *perpetrator trauma*; nostalgia is examined by building on Svetlana Boym's distinction of *restorative* (*nostos* – return home) and *reflective* (*algia* – longing) nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001); and melancholy is discussed with Sigmund Freud's seminal essay on "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) in mind. Furthermore, in order to better grasp Humbert Humbert's complicated narrative, this thesis employs Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the *chronotope of threshold* introduced in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (1981). In Bakhtin's view, chronotopes ("time space") are fundamental to understanding temporal and spatial relationships in a narrative, and "to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative" (Bakhtin 250). For Bakhtin, the chronotope of threshold denotes a crisis and a break, "and is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)" (248). In its essence, the chronotope of threshold is concerned with depictions of space and time in the narrative, as well as the movement from one space to another (or one time to another), which, according to Bakhtin, is "always metaphorical and symbolic" (*ibid.*). In this thesis I examine *breaks* and *crises* in Humbert's memoir, pointing out his apprehensions of stepping over traumatic thresholds, and investigate how those thresholds are informed by, and, simultaneously, occasion trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy. I suggest that Bakhtin's chronotope of threshold allows for an interesting interpretation of Humbert's discourse, as it discloses a set of original motivations for his conduct in the novel. In the following, I discuss the three concepts in question, examine their role in existing criticism of Nabokov's works, and suggest how the present thesis contributes to the conversation on trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy in *Lolita*.

1.2 From “Wound of the Body” to “Wound of the Soul”: On Trauma, Nostalgia, and Melancholy

Defining trauma is a complicated task: from the Greek word signifying “a wound, a hurt, a defeat” to the Latin meaning of “a physical wound,” to a more recent (1894) definition of a “sense of psychic wound, unpleasant experience which causes abnormal stress” (“Trauma,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*), trauma has evolved to denote both physical and mental afflictions. The industrial revolution, railway accidents resulting in a *railway spine* (spinal damage) and a *traumatic neurosis* (neurological damage) have all contributed to a 19th century understanding of trauma as a physical ailment. However, with Jean-Martin Charcot’s development of a *nervous shock*, Pierre Janet’s discovery of *dissociation*, and Sigmund Freud’s post-First World War observations of surviving soldiers, trauma has expanded its meaning to include psychological wounds as well.³ Its “dual genealogy” (Davis and Meretoja 2) has allowed for trauma to be considered a medical, as well as a moral and ethical term, where “the first concerns the history of medicine,” while “the other the history of moral values and sensibilities” (3).

Literary trauma theory borrows its theoretical framework from psychological observations and findings, but instead of solely focusing on an individual, it prioritizes a connection between trauma and culture. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja argue, and I agree, that “even individual traumatic experience is always culturally mediated,” (4) meaning that our discourse on trauma is rooted in, and is a part of, our cultural experiences. Literature, then, as an expression of culture, allows for a unique approach to understanding different traumatic events: from individual and personal (a loss of a loved one) to more collective ones such as natural disasters or genocide (6). Thus, literature serves as a medium “for “testimony” to psychological wounds” (Hartman qtd. in Sütterlin 19) and is capable of performing trauma by means of certain narrative techniques, namely flashbacks and disassociations (ibid.). Indeed, such merits that literary trauma theory offers to our understanding of individual and collective traumas are significant. However, certain shortcomings within trauma studies have been causing heated debates and disagreements among critics and scholars. One such debate that this thesis brings to the fore is the disputed connection between trauma and victimhood.

³ For a more conclusive analysis of the history of trauma, refer to Nicole A. Sütterlin’s article “*History of Trauma Theory*” in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 2020, pp. 11-23.

Many scholars of literary trauma theory tend to consider trauma inseparable from victimhood. Anne Whitehead, in her article on “Representing the Child Soldier: Trauma, Postcolonialism and Ethics in Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen and Me*,” explains that there is a prevalent tendency in contemporary trauma studies to associate trauma with victimhood, which, consequently, leads to a misconception that all traumatized subjects are victims (Whitehead 244). In my view, this dependence of trauma on victimhood limits the scope of literary trauma research: it mistakes *all* traumatized subjects for victims, and avoids investigating more controversial cases of traumatization. Such faulty perception has been contested in Holocaust studies, particularly with the emergence of the term *perpetrator trauma*, which refers to a certain type of a traumatic experience undergone by perpetrators of violent acts of killings and genocide. Thus, perpetrator trauma challenges our moral and ethical perception of what constitutes trauma. As Michael Rothberg argues, and I agree, “the concept of trauma emerges from a diagnostic realm that lies beyond guilt and innocence or good and evil,” (Rothberg 90) and, therefore, “should not be a category that confirms moral value” (ibid.), a statement I explore in more detail in my discussion of Humbert Humbert as both a perpetrator *and* a traumatized subject.

In many interpretations and criticisms of Nabokov’s literary works trauma is a common topic: some critics point out trans-generational trauma in his fictional novels (Shcherbak), while others focus on uncovering the trauma of exile in his memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951) (Marlatt). Still, an overwhelming amount of attention surrounds psychoanalytical approach to trauma and narrative in Nabokov’s works, especially concerning *Lolita*. For instance, Claire A. Setton in her thesis on the language of trauma in *Lolita* contends that gender is critical in understanding Dolores’ traumatization. She argues that Lolita’s trauma is both known (through Humbert Humbert’s male narrative) and unknown (her trauma after escaping Humbert’s captivity, and, hence, inaccessible to him). Besides, Setton suggests that Humbert’s childhood trauma is also present in the novel and figures in the discourse in the form of symbols and imagery (Setton 21). Similarly, Jana Chrenková examines Humbert Humbert’s childhood traumatization as a precursor to his obsession with Dolores, and an instigator of his paedophilic tendencies. In her analysis, Chrenková reaches a conclusion that Humbert is neither purely good nor purely evil “and does not deserve to be cast as the villain” (Chrenková_33). What the present thesis adds to the discussion on Humbert Humbert’s discourse is an analysis of traumatic thresholds in his narrative, and a reconsideration of

Humbert as both a traumatizing *and* a traumatized subject, which in turn emphasizes the ambiguous connection between trauma and victimhood.

Nostalgia is another concept relevant to the discussion of Humbert Humbert's discourse. Similar to trauma, nostalgia emerged as a medical term: nostalgia, as a "disease of afflicted imagination" (Boym 4) and longing for home, was at first believed to physically affect the body, resulting in nausea, loss of appetite, brain inflammation, and "marasmus and a propensity for suicide" (ibid.). Those affected by nostalgia, most often soldiers displaced by wars and armed conflicts, were thought to be manic, possessed by "a mania of longing" (ibid.). At the time, such mania was curable by leeches, opium, and a return home. However, nostalgia, propelled by an immense sense of loss and the inability to recall the lost object, became incurable: it not only afflicted the body, but also the mind and the soul. Later, Romantic poets and writers embraced nostalgia as a tool in their search for meaning. Yet, following the rapid progress of industrialization, as well as scientific and medical developments, nostalgia acquired negative connotations – it became "a European disease" (17) akin to hysteria and paranoia. Nowadays, nostalgia has shifted in meaning to signify "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (xiii).

Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* thus contends that "modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, [and] for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (8) – I revisit this remark in my discussion of Humbert's nostalgia and his failed attempt at a return home to Hotel Mirana. Boym's seminal work on nostalgia serves as a foundation for the analysis of Humbert Humbert's memoir from the perspective of loss, as well as the inability of return. Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: the *restorative* and the *reflective*. Restorative nostalgia dwells in nostos and attempts to return to and reconstruct the lost home (xviii): it "proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps," (41) meaning that it takes its source from concrete truth and tradition. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia resides in algia, "in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance," (ibid.) and, curiously, "delays the homecoming" (xviii). While these two types of nostalgia do not explain "the nature of longing," they highlight "the ways in which we make sense of our seemingly ineffable homesickness and how we view our relationship to a collective home" (41). For Boym, collective remembrance is integral in understanding nostalgia as a shared human experience. However, in the present thesis, I switch the focus from collective to individual remembrance, as I examine Humbert's own confrontation with nostalgia through his memories.

Nabokov, an author in exile writing in a “foreign”,⁴ English language, seems to have had a profound understanding of the notion of nostalgia. In his autobiographical memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov famously proclaimed that “the nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood,” (Nabokov 70) foregrounding feelings of nostalgia as integral to his recollections of childhood. Unsurprisingly, some literary critics turn to Nabokov’s earliest works of fiction written in exile to expound on his nostalgic sentiments (Sicker), while others emphasize the influence of exile, biographical details, as well as bilingualism on the formation of his artistic world (Kaplan). Such critical readings suggest that what appears to lack from the discussion on Nabokov and nostalgia is a distinct separation between his biographical and fictional worlds, in addition to an unmistakable gap in research on nostalgia regarding *Lolita*. The present thesis partially rectifies these oversights by introducing the notion of nostalgia as separate from Nabokov’s biography: instead of allowing it to dwell in Nabokov’s own past, it restricts the representation of nostalgia to his work of fiction. Thus, it is not Nabokov who figures as *the* nostalgic in this thesis but Humbert Humbert – a fictional character whose discourse is obfuscated by that very sentiment. Further in my discussion on nostalgia, I suggest that for Humbert, nostalgia functions as a propellant and an incentive to write and “immortalize” his recollections and memories of Dolores.

Finally, the thesis examines how melancholy functions in Humbert’s memoir and how it informs his own narrative. Akin to trauma and nostalgia, melancholy first became known in the medical field as a manifestation of a physical ailment. Hippocrates contended that the primary cause for melancholy stemmed from the excess of black bile in the body, secreted by the kidneys (Telles-Correia and Gama Marques 1). Hippocrates’ theory of four temperaments (or four humours),⁵ of which one – black bile - referred to melancholy, was instrumental in establishing melancholy as a pathological condition. Before the 18th century, melancholy continued to figure in the medical field as an affective symptom. Then, in the 18-19th centuries, it was relegated to denote abnormal beliefs, until in the 20th century, following developments in psychoanalysis, it became synonymous with depression (3).

Sigmund Freud in his essay on “Mourning and Melancholia,” (1917) tackled the illusive question of melancholy by counterposing it with mourning. For Freud, mourning

⁴ Russian was Nabokov’s native language, although he was fluent in both Russian and English.

⁵ Hippocrates argued that human body consists of four vital bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile (ibid.), each of them responsible for different human behaviours.

signified a reaction to a loss of a loved person or “some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud 243). Freud did not regard mourning as a pathological condition requiring medical treatment: he contended that mourning, processed by a conscious mind, could be overcome given a certain period of time. Melancholy, on the other hand, despite dealing with similar feelings of loss, prioritized “a loss of a more ideal kind,” (245) where a loved object had not actually died, but, rather, had been lost as an object of love: the “[melancholic] knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (ibid.). Furthermore, Freud distinguished certain behaviours characteristic to a melancholic, such as diminution of self-regard, impoverishment of ego, and moral inferiority that were not present in those suffering from mourning (246). The present thesis is neither concerned with discussing character traits of a melancholic nor applying those traits to the main character in the novel. Instead, it examines thresholds in Humbert Humbert’s memoir that are informed by melancholy in order to understand how his discourse shapes his own narrative. While this thesis acknowledges that Freud’s initial remarks on melancholy are limiting and have been challenged by scholars in recent years, I consider “Mourning and Melancholia” to be an important work in the field of psychoanalysis, with insightful approach and relevance to the phenomenon of melancholy not only in psychoanalytical but literary critical studies as well.

Many criticisms of Nabokov’s works mention melancholy as a footnote or a fleeting comment, without further scrutiny or investigation of the term. For instance, Henry Grosshans in his discussion on Nabokovian characters rightfully points out that “a certain autumnal melancholy surrounds Nabokov’s characters. ... They realize that they are the remnant of a soon-to-be-extinct species and have an acute sense of mortality” (Grosshans 408). However accurate this observation is, it avoids examining melancholy as an integral part of the Nabokovian artistic world. For example, I suggest that in *Lolita* melancholy sets the mood and the tone for Humbert’s entire memoir: it appears in the form of a “melancholy snore,” (Nabokov 148) in “an atmosphere of great melancholy and disgust,” (289) and “with a mischievous and melancholy smile,” (309) distinct to the protagonist of the novel. In addition, Humbert Humbert describes himself as a “cruel melancholy me” (277) and “an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy” (16). Joseph D. Brookbank in his analysis on melancholy in *Lolita* argues that Humbert Humbert in his “infinite melancholy” disregards any losses or afflictions that female characters have experienced at his hands so that he can “obfuscate and appropriate the representation of Dolly’s body and subjectivity in

order to express *his* sorrow and remorse” (Brookbank 2) - an observation I reiterate in my discussion on trauma and melancholy. In other words, what Brookbank suggests is that for Humbert, melancholy functions as a tool that privileges his male experiences of sorrow and, at the same time, disregards the suffering of female characters. I consider Brookbank’s remarks on “gendered melancholy” in *Lolita* to be incredibly perceptive, offering a possibility for further research on the topic of melancholy in Nabokov’s novel.

To sum up, the present thesis draws on and contributes to previous research and criticisms on trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy in Nabokov’s *Lolita*. It considers Bakhtin’s chronotope of threshold in its discussion of thresholds, breaks and crises in Humbert’s narrative that are informed by the three concepts in question. This thesis is divided into three chapters: the first chapter discusses trauma in Humbert’s memoir, and establishes Humbert Humbert as a traumatized subject, considering his narrative to be obfuscated by trauma. In addition, it emphasizes the ambiguity of the connection between trauma and victimhood, and argues that this ambivalence allows Humbert to negate Dolores’ suffering. The second chapter investigates Boym’s notion of nostalgia. It argues that nostalgia functions as an integral component in understanding Humbert’s desire for an attempted return to the Hotel Mirana of his childhood, and analyses how nostalgia anticipates his longing to immortalize Lolita in his memoir. Finally, the third chapter examines how Humbert contextualizes melancholy in his narrative, and then, discusses how melancholy is prolonged in his imagination. Bakhtin’s chronotope of threshold encompasses the entirety of the discussion, and emerges as a crucial component in all chapters.

In an interview with Neil Hickey for *American Weekly*, Nabokov famously stated that “Lolita is dead. I have no plans to resurrect her” (Hickey 56). While the present thesis does not aim to “resurrect” *Lolita*, it hopes to add an individual perspective to the debate on trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy in regard to Nabokov’s controversial novel.

2 Chapter One: Humbert Humbert on Trauma, Abuse, and Victimhood

Nabokov's *Lolita* begins with a foreword by a fictitious John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., in charge of editing and preparing Humbert Humbert's manuscript for print posthumously. From Ray's introduction readers learn that Humbert Humbert is dead: he has suffered from coronary thrombosis and died in legal captivity several days prior to his scheduled trial.⁶ Ray finds it relevant to emphasize that Humbert's relationship with Dolores is not entirely aberrant; he states that "at least 12% of American adult males ... enjoy yearly, in one way or another the special experience "H.H." describes with such despair" (Nabokov 3). In other words, Ray's statement functions to contextualize and, in a way, rationalize Humbert's behaviour by exemplifying that his predicament is not an isolated occurrence,⁷ and it could have been avoided had "our demented diarist" (ibid.) gone to a competent psychopathologist. In my view, the purpose of Ray's foreword is not necessarily to justify Humbert's transgressions, but, rather, to introduce him as an ambiguous author: morally "he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy. ... He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman," but, at the same time, as an artist, he is able "to conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!" (ibid.). Such ambiguity between normalcy and transgression follows Humbert Humbert throughout his entire memoir. The present chapter is particularly interested in examining how his discourse frames him both as an abuser *and* a traumatized subject, how it rejects the perception of Dolores as a victim, and how his understanding of his own behaviour problematizes our comprehension of trauma and victimhood.

2.1 Humbert Humbert's Thresholds of Trauma, and Traumatic Belatedness

Humbert Humbert's memoir functions as an archive of past recollections, events, and traumas. In order to understand how his discourse operates in the novel, it is integral to first uncover traumatic thresholds in his narrative, and then to examine their effect on his story.

⁶ Interestingly, Humbert Humbert is on trial for murdering Quilty not for abusing Dolores.

⁷ Similarly, Humbert normalizes his behaviour by pointing out some legal and historic discrepancies: "Let me remind my reader that in England, with the passage of Children and Young Person Act in 1933, the term "girl-child" is defined as "a girl who is over eight but under fourteen years" (after that, from fourteen to seventeen, the statutory definition is "young person") (Nabokov 18); "marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian Provinces" (19); and, in the same breath, decries the unjust society and the double standards it propagates: "I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve" (17).

Here, I turn to his childhood memories and discuss certain losses (thresholds) that subconsciously and *belatedly* affect his narrative.

As mentioned in the introduction, trauma is a complex phenomenon, the understanding of which has developed over hundreds of years. For this reason, it is essential to further clarify the approach that this thesis employs in order to understand how trauma relates to the experience of traumatic events. In an article on encountering trauma, Cassie Pedersen makes an interesting observation: she contends that trauma cannot be reduced to a singular event. She further notes that “while trauma is often understood to reside in an event having occurred in the past, it is not until after this event has passed that the impact of trauma is felt,” (Pedersen 26) and, consequently, “it is thus difficult, if not impossible, to identify the precise origins of trauma” (ibid.). Pedersen’s remarks foreground what Cathy Caruth in her studies on trauma has described as *belatedness*. For Caruth, belatedness signifies an event that “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 4). In other words, a traumatic event that has not been fully integrated at the time of its occurrence in the past, returns in a belated form to impact the present (and future). According to Pedersen, the movement of trauma between past and present, and present and future, is thus both progressive and retroactive: “The past assumes a belated impact on the present and the present retroactively modifies the past” (Pedersen 27). Similarly, Humbert Humbert’s childhood trauma, unassimilated at the time of its occurrence, returns to “haunt” him in the present, and, inadvertently, informs his discourse. While I agree with Pedersen’s argument that trauma has “no precise origins,” it is nevertheless valuable to discuss particular events from Humbert Humbert’s childhood that lead to his traumatization in the present, in order to understand how his discourse conceals his abusive disposition and, at the same time, negates Dolores’s victimization.

Humbert Humbert’s memoir begins with a recollection of his childhood memories at Hotel Mirana on the French Riviera – a luxurious hotel owned by his wealthy father. On a surface level, Humbert appears to have had an ordinary relationship with his father whom he “adored and respected ... and felt glad for,”⁸ and who “took me [Humbert] out boating and biking, taught me to swim and dive and water-ski” and “gave me all the information he thought I needed about sex” (Nabokov 9). However, in a brief moment of awareness, he remembers that while his father was busy entertaining other women on a tour in Italy, he

⁸ Humbert refers to his father as “mon cher petit papa” (Nabokov 9), French for “my dear little father”.

“had nobody to complain to, nobody to consult” (ibid.). The loneliness he hints at is amplified by the absence of his mother – she is his earliest remembered loss. Humbert recounts her death as a “freak accident” (8): she is, presumably, struck by lightning while on a picnic outside. Such an uncertain conclusion can only be made based on Humbert’s peculiar description of the event: “(picnic, lightning)” (ibid.). Joan Gibbons in her discussion on contemporary art and memory fittingly notes that “the magnitude of extreme trauma is so great that it can only ever be partially told,” (Gibbons 74) meaning that for Humbert to elaborate on his mother’s disturbing death implies that he has to confront his own extreme trauma. Instead, her death is compartmentalized into two seemingly innocent images in parentheses, the true significance of which is never consciously acknowledged. In her discussion, Gibbons also mentions “the inherent unspeakability of trauma and the impossibility of properly representing the experience of pain,” (59) which, I suggest, is an apt description of Humbert’s confrontation with his own trauma: he is not only unable to speak of the circumstances surrounding his mother’s death, but also incapable of representing the effect of her loss. For him, she exists as “a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory” (Nabokov 8) – she is merely a fleeting image buried deep within his recollections.⁹

Death continues to haunt Humbert late into his teenage years: after his sixteenth birthday he loses Aunt Sybil,¹⁰ his mother’s eldest sister, and the “unpaid governess and housekeeper” (ibid.) at the Hotel Mirana, in love with Humbert’s father. Humbert admits that he “was extremely fond of her, despite the rigidity ... of some of her rules,” (ibid.) and yet his memory of her is restricted to a photographic remembrance of her “azure eyes and a waxen complexion” (ibid.). Similarly, her loss is impossible for Humbert to recount and acknowledge – as Gibbons notes, paraphrasing Caruth, that such behaviour signals the “inability to integrate the [traumatic] experience” (Gibbons 74). Throughout the memoir, Humbert exhibits a pattern of refusal to accept traumatic breaks and crises in his

⁹ Much later, almost at the end of his memoir, Humbert returns to the image of his mother as he remembers “my mother, in a livid white dress, under the tumbling mist (so I vividly imagined her), had run panting ecstatically up that ridge above Moulinet to be felled there by a thunderbolt” (Nabokov 327) – a brief sign of recognition of his trauma, which he then attributes to his imagination. I return to this observation in my discussion of melancholy in chapter three.

¹⁰ Curiously, Aunt Sybil is the only figure in Humbert’s family that has a name: both his father and his mother remain nameless in his recollections.

life:¹¹ first, the deaths of his mother, and Aunt Sybil, and then, the loss of Annabel – a precursor to his obsession with Dolores.

Annabel's significance is best described by Humbert himself: "There might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child," (Nabokov 7) and "I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (12). Humbert contends that they both were "madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other" (10) and that their love extended beyond innocent conversations. However, any physical contact between them had always been disrupted and disturbed by others, and, thus, always incomplete. He remembers Annabel "as an image in the laboratory of your mind [that you recreate] with your eyes open," (ibid.) where physical attributes capture most of the attention. Therefore, Annabel is described in such terms as "honey-colored skin," "thin arms," "brown bobbed hair" and "long lashes," (ibid.) almost like a figure in a photograph. In fact, for some time, Humbert has been in a possession of a snapshot of Annabel alongside her parents and others taken by his aunt "on the last day of our fatal summer" (11). According to Gibbons, a snapshot, or a photograph, is endowed with particular characteristics: it is "characterized by a physical connection to the thing photographed" (Gibbons 34). Humbert's physical connection with Annabel is ruptured on two levels: first, with her death to typhus "on the fatal summer," and second, with the loss of the snapshot "during the wanderings of my [Humbert's] adult years," (Nabokov 11) meaning that his failure to maintain any semblance of a physical attachment to Annabel continues to torment him. Moreover, Dana Brand observes that a photograph serves another distinct purpose: "A photograph is a separation of surface from substance. It provides an empty form that lends itself to the imaginative "filling" of the viewer" (Brand 17). This suggests that with Humbert's loss of the photograph, his desire and fantasy for a particular connection with Annabel becomes disrupted: instead of using the photograph as an outlet for his "imaginative filling," Humbert intends to find another object to redirect his fancies onto.

Humbert's inability to internalize and to reconcile with Annabel's loss "haunts" him later in his adulthood: "That little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted me ever since" (Nabokov 14). This recalls what Caruth has noted in her discussion on the belatedness of trauma, namely, that a traumatic event is experienced in a repeated possession of the person experiencing it, and that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an

¹¹ This, I argue later in the chapter, is the main reason for his inability to acknowledge Dolores' traumatization as well.

image of event” (Caruth 4-5). I suggest that Humbert, “haunted” and “possessed” by Annabel, follows a certain pattern in his choice of nymphets, which is partially based on Annabel’s physical appearance and partially on her aura. He is quick to discern that not every young girl between ages nine and fourteen is a nymphet, but only those that have a distinct set of physical qualities in addition to a particular “air” around them, which is “their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)”¹² (Nabokov 15). For Humbert, the traumatic loss of Annabel and her image is akin to a catastrophe, a Bakhtinian chronotope of threshold which he is apprehensive to step over. It is a Bakhtinian crisis in which “time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time” (Bakhtin 248). In other words, Humbert experiences Annabel’s death as a catastrophic break that transcends the chronology of time and from which he is incapable of recovering. In a rare moment of self-awareness, he is able to articulate that trauma by remembering that “the shock of Annabel’s death consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer, [and] made of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth” (Nabokov 12). I suggest that for this reason he seeks to “immortalize” her in another vessel, until he admits that “at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (14). This further confirms his inability to understand the scope of his own trauma – instead of moving forward, he becomes spellbound by Dolores.

To sum up, these examples illustrate breaking points in Humbert’s early life that have belatedly affected his transgressive relationships with and abusive behaviours towards women. Traumatic losses of his mother, his aunt, and Annabel, which have not been internalized and processed at their time of occurrence, have merged into a denial of trauma, and have inadvertently affected his narrative. Here, I have aimed to demonstrate that Humbert’s inability to articulate his own traumatic experiences frames him as a traumatized subject. However, it is important to note that this does not vindicate him in his abuse of Dolores – I return to this point in my discussion on his discourse of Dolores’ victimization. In the following, I elaborate on how Humbert’s discourse, informed by trauma, presents him as

¹² Another distinguishing feature is a significant age gap between a nymphet and a man under her spell: “There must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet’s spell” (Nabokov 16-17). At the time of their romantic encounter, Annabel was of similar age to Humbert, therefore “no nymphet to me [Humbert]” (ibid.).

an abuser. I then juxtapose it with his discourse on Dolores' victimization and point to how it negates her as a victim.

2.2 Humbert Humbert's Discourse on Abuse

In the novel, Humbert Humbert figures as an ambiguous character and is, seemingly, filled with contradictions: he is simultaneously a traumatized subject and an abuser. For many readers of his memoir, it is evident that his demeanour towards women in his life has always been disrespectful, if not, borderline violent. For example, upon finding out about his first wife's, Valeria's, infidelity, he "shouted ... striking her on the knee with my fist" (28) and contemplated whether he "should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither" (30). Meanwhile, his sham marriage to Dolores' mother Charlotte Haze has been all the more tumultuous: in an attempt to become more intimate with Lolita, Humbert has considered drugging her, and, later, fearful of Lolita's departure to a boarding school at Charlotte's insistence, drowning her so that "only when the curtain came down on her for good, would I permit myself to yell for help" (97). For him, Charlotte has functioned merely as an obstacle between himself and his object of desire - Lolita (Connolly 82). However, it is precisely his transgressive relationship with Dolores that highlights his abusive disposition. Here, I examine Humbert Humbert's discourse on abuse informed by his unacknowledged trauma, and later compare it with his approach towards Dolores' traumatization.

Humbert Humbert, a professor of literature and an educated man, has always been especially particular about the ways he appeared to others: from his sophisticated appearance to his manner of speech, to his hobbies, to his personality traits. "I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*,¹³ an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanour," (Nabokov 25) he contends. At the beginning of the memoir, he is insistent on solidifying this image as a good, decent, person: "Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. He had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child" (19). By implication, his "goodness" is directed towards ordinary, innocent, children and it is only nymphets, with their "demoniac nature," that are capable of corrupting him. The shift of blame on others for his behaviour is a recurring theme in Humbert's memoir – after all, it is Lolita's fault that he becomes obsessed with her. Never mind that his preoccupation with young girls has been present prior, during, and after their

¹³ French, meaning "my misfortunes".

relationship (e.g., Annabel's sisters, a "young whore" (23) Monique, his young neighbours Marion and Mabel). Curiously, his proclamation is followed by an admission that his interference with "the innocence of a child" is conditional: it is only "if there was the least risk of a row," (19) meaning the least risk of being caught, that he abstains from abuse. Furthermore, in an attempt to distinguish himself from "the majority of sex offenders," (98) he contends that "we [nympholepts] are not sex fiends! ... We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, ... ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet" (ibid.). In other words, Humbert strives to draw a distinct line between himself and morally deviant and aberrant "others". By implication, he is not a sexual predator, and, therefore, unable to inflict harm on anyone. It is no surprise, then, that he fails to acknowledge his abusive conduct towards Dolores, as, simultaneously, he "takes advantage of the girl's emotional needs, her naivete, and her inexperience" (Connolly 34). In my view, it is important to discuss here how Humbert Humbert formulates and describes his behaviour towards Lolita in order to better grasp his discourse on abuse.

In a similar manner to how he perceives himself, Humbert Humbert considers his actions to be innocent and harmless, particularly, if directed towards Lolita. On one occasion, in an effort to satisfy his needs for a physical connection with Dolores, he describes how he "took advantage of those invisible gestures of mine to touch her [Lolita's] hand, her shoulder" (Nabokov 49) and "finally, when I had completely enmeshed my glowing darling in this weave of ethereal caresses, I dared stroke her bare leg" (ibid.). For him, the background of the scene (the aesthetics of a warm, dusky evening on a piazza, engulfed in "amorous darkness" (48)) sets the tone for his actions: romantic, innocent, and, by implication, consensual. Throughout the memoir, Humbert is preoccupied with his own feelings of lust to such an extent that he completely forgets to account for Dolores' experiences, and, in certain instances, reinterprets her behaviour to suit his narrative. For instance, when Lolita sits on his lap to study a piece of his written work, Humbert asserts that "all at once I knew I could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity. I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches," (52) despite Lolita showing no intention to instigate any physical contact. In other words, Humbert continuously veils his borderline predatory behaviour in the guise of an innocent "Hollywood" romance - a classic tale of forbidden love.

Emboldened by his prior successful attempts, Humbert later takes a step further and, pinning Dolores down on the couch, essentially molests her. Such a conclusion can be

difficult to assert due to the cunning way in which he describes the occurrence. He encourages his “learned readers” (62) to participate in the scene, and “see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is” (ibid.). I suggest that by involving readers in the scene, Humbert aims to undermine the severity of the situation and excuse his pervasive behaviour: for if one other person finds his conduct ordinary and innocent, then it justifies it as such. After all, his lawyer agrees that viewed with “impartial sympathy” (ibid.) it can indeed be interpreted as careful and chaste. Also, the participation of others in the scene implies that whatever he is describing is an act of performance viewed by a group of people, rather than what it actually is: a lone predator molesting a young girl. Julian Connolly notes that Humbert’s aim in this instance is to transform the experience that many would consider traumatizing for Dolores into “an *aesthetic* moment” and to shift it “out of the realm of quotidian reality and into the realm of art” (Connolly 85). In other words, he attempts to produce a theatricalized version of his abuse so that the readers are persuaded that his actions have “no consequences in “real” life” (ibid.).

To further solidify and justify his “innocence”, Humbert then describes in great detail Lolita’s “seductive” behaviour (that she lay with her feet on his lap and let him touch her legs), which drives him to “excitement bordering on insanity” (Nabokov 64). He remembers that she “wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back,” (67) while “I [Humbert] crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known” (ibid.). For Humbert, Dolores’ molestation appears perfectly innocent, and he later asserts that “I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done” (68). He refers to Lolita as a “photographic image,” (ibid.) a static object, arrested in time, unaltered and untarnished by his actions, while he, the spectator, is “abusing” (ibid.) himself from a distance. Connolly fittingly points out that Humbert’s “solipsistic attitude” (Connolly 87) is clearly expressed in the following quotation: “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps, more real than Lolita; ... having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own” (Nabokov 68). For Humbert, Dolores Haze, a twelve-year-old ordinary child, does not exist, and, therefore, has “no life of her own” – it is the imaginary, fantastic figure of a nymphet, Lolita, that he keeps pursuing. These particular instances exemplify Humbert’s obliviousness to (and a denial of) his abusive nature. While he asserts that in all his interactions with Dolores his prime concern has been maintaining her innocence and well-being, his inability to distinguish between Dolores as an autonomous child and Lolita as a creation of his lust and

desire leads to her abuse, exploitation, and traumatization that he is blissfully ignorant of. As a result, while his discourse is veiled in the aesthetics of romance, longing, and desire, his actions testify to a more predatory and exploitative conduct.

In discussing Humbert's cunning discourse of abuse, it is also valuable to return to his childhood experiences of trauma. As previously mentioned, Humbert has continuously refused to accept and articulate traumatic breaks in his life, and his treatments for depression, breakdowns, and bouts of insanity in multiple sanatoria have been met with contempt and mockery on his part. His recurring "*pavor nocturnus*," (77) or sleep terrors, are a testament to his denial, as he observes that such nightly terrors are amplified "after a chance term had struck me in the random readings of my boyhood, such as ... the dreadful, mysterious, insidious words "trauma", "traumatic event", and "transom"" (ibid.). In other words, his unacknowledged trauma reappears in the form of *pavor nocturnus* at the remembrance of his childhood (boyhood) traumatic events. In the same manner that he denies his trauma, he refuses to accept his abusive demeanour. As I will argue further in the chapter, his inability (and, to some extent, refusal) to recognize his own trauma has also hindered him from acknowledging the trauma and abuse he has subjected Dolores to.

A further analysis of his abusive demeanour towards Dolores reveals an underlying connection between his mistreatment of her, and his childhood trauma. For Humbert Humbert, many of his (unacknowledged) traumatic experiences have occurred in the Hotel Mirana on the French Riviera – the deaths of his mother, his aunt, and Annabel. Yet he obviously maintains that Hotel Mirana is a happy place, "a kind of private universe," (8) obfuscated from the rest of the world by his imagination. Upon first seeing Dolores, Humbert exclaims that "there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses" (41). Here, the word "Riviera" takes him back to the magical world of Hotel Mirana, to the "'princedom by the sea" in my tortured past," (42) the only happy place he attributes any of his childhood joy to. I suggest that as a result of his inability to accept Hotel Mirana as place of suffering and trauma, Humbert falsely attaches a positive meaning to it, which further prevents him from distinguishing between "the reality" of his childhood and his imagination. His delusion with the perfect world of Hotel Mirana and a constant search for joy and happiness places an incredible amount of pressure on Dolores to live up to his childhood ideals.

Additionally, the word "Riviera" refers to his Riviera *love* – Annabel. He continues: "It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back,

the same chestnut head of hair” (42). According to Humbert, Annabel’s physical features immortalized in Dolores have erased the entirety of his past prior to meeting her – “the twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished” (ibid.). By looking at Dolores, he remembers every physical contact he had with Annabel, and belatedly relives the “immortal day” (ibid.) before her death. For him, Annabel is not lost but merely rediscovered. As a result, he instigates a type of a physical connection with Dolores that he has lost with Annabel: he reimagines and reconstructs their interrupted sexual encounters twenty-five years ago by merging Annabel and Dolores into one. It is important to note that upon reading his memoir, one can discern that Humbert’s relationship with Annabel has been fairly ordinary, and, allegedly, consensual – Annabel seems to have been eager for a contact with him, and, more importantly, both she and Humbert have been of the same age at the time. However, the power dynamic shifts in his relationship with Dolores: not only is she twenty-five years younger than him, but she is also more apprehensive to explore her sexuality. Humbert’s inability to distinguish between his ordinary relationship with Annabel and a transgressive one with Dolores leads to a conundrum - he is blissfully ignorant of the trauma and abuse he subjects Lolita to. This suggests that one of the chief reasons for his abusive disposition towards Dolores is his denial of his childhood trauma, particularly, Annabel’s death, as a result of which, he fails to acknowledge Dolores’ bodily autonomy. Consequently, the distinction between Annabel and Dolores continues to remain opaque, that is, until “this Lolita, *my* Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype” (ibid.). In the following, I focus on a particular event in the novel – the death of Dolores’ mother Charlotte – to resume the discussion on Humbert’s denial of his own trauma, and Dolores’ traumatization.

2.3 Humbert Humbert on Dolores’ Traumatization

From the preceding discussion on Humbert’s discourse of abuse, it becomes evident that his behaviour towards women borders on the violent and abusive, and is especially noticeable in the manner he treats his second wife, Charlotte. For him, “Bland American Charlotte” (93) functions as an obstacle to attaining the ultimate goal of being physically reunited with Dolores. He admits that “to break Charlotte’s will, I would have to break her heart. If I broke her heart, her image of me would break too” (94). Humbert may initially feel frightened of Charlotte, but he is nevertheless aware of the advantage he holds over her, that is, her ignorance of his feelings for Dolores. “*My* feelings she could not divine,” (93) he observes, knowing that this allows him to exploit Lolita without suspicion or scrutiny. However,

Humbert's triumph is short-lived: upon returning home one day he finds out that Charlotte has managed to access his secret diary, full of musings about her daughter. Charlotte is understandably upset and threatens to never allow Humbert to "see that miserable brat again," (107) to which Humbert answers, in a futile attempt of defending himself, that "the notes you found were fragments of a novel" (108). As a response, Charlotte continues to furiously write three letters (one to Lolita, another to a boarding school, and the final one to Humbert), before leaving him alone in the house. Shortly afterward, Humbert receives a phone call from a neighbour saying that Charlotte has been run over by a car and killed, while hurrying across the street to send the letters.

Charlotte's tragic death is almost a footnote in Humbert's mind. Her "mangled remains" (110) are of little concern to him as he busies himself with observing minutiae surroundings of the accident, and the funeral itself, "as quiet as the marriage had been," (111) is unworthy of further elaboration "in this very special memoir" (ibid.). Soon after, Humbert convinces his inquisitive neighbours, the Farlows, that he had a romantic fling with Charlotte years prior, which Jean Farlow interprets to mean that he is really Lolita's father, and this misinterpretation permits him to claim sole custody of Dolores. Later, he informs them that in the meantime Dolores has gone on a five-day hike without any means of reaching her and, therefore, should not be disturbed by upsetting news of her mother's death: "The experience might react on her future, psychiatrists have analyzed such cases" (113). In truth, Lolita's welfare is not a concern for Humbert. Rather, he is deterred from reaching out to her by people frequenting their house, "scheming to take her away from me," (114) and by her own unpredictability, namely, that she can "show some foolish distrust of me, a sudden repugnance, vague fear and the like – and gone would be the magic prize at the very instant of triumph" (ibid.). Humbert's preoccupation with manipulating others and keeping Lolita to himself signifies the lack of recognition on his part of the magnitude of the event: Charlotte, Dolores' mother and only caretaker, is dead. This suggests that his own unacknowledged trauma and inability to process and grieve the death of his own mother hinders him from allowing Dolores to experience similar emotions. Not only that but Humbert's behaviour suggests that he, at least to a certain degree, comprehends the severity of the situation. He rightfully predicts that Dolores may be shocked and upset upon finding out about Charlotte's death – a normal reaction to such news. However, Lolita's emotional outburst may shatter Humbert's image of her as "the magic prize": "To have the child all around me, sobbing, clinging to me" (113) is the exact opposite of how he imagines their reunion, with Lolita in

his arms “shedding tears that I would kiss away faster than they could well” (114). In that moment, Humbert is too preoccupied with satisfying his own fantasy, which results in a twofold traumatization of Dolores: on one hand, she loses her mother, and, on the other, has her trust betrayed by him.

Nevertheless, Humbert continues in his delusion as he imagines that he will “tell Lolita her mother was about to undergo a major operation at an invented hospital, and then keep moving with my sleepy nymphet from inn to inn while her mother got better and better and finally died” (119). For his plan to succeed, Lolita must therefore be “sleepy”, blissfully unaware of and confused by continuously changing surroundings and oblivious to events occurring in “real” life - in other words, calm and submissive. In his eagerness to finally be physically connected with Dolores, Humbert speeds to The Enchanted Hunters Hotel, where he books a room for the two of them. In the hotel, he administers a sleeping pill¹⁴ to Lolita and awaits the moment when he “would let myself into that [room] ‘342’ and find my nymphet, my beauty and bride, emprisoned in her crystal sleep” (139). Humbert is insistent that his intentions with Dolores are in no way harmful, especially since her innocence and purity have already “been slightly damaged through some juvenile erotic experience, no doubt homosexual, at that accursed camp of hers” (140). Humbert’s reasoning that Dolores is not “pure” or “innocent” allows him to ignore the fact that his behaviour is traumatic to her. Moreover, his observation reflects what Connolly describes as a “desire to see her as perfectly preserved for his own [Humbert’s] private delectation, and not someone who has a romantic or erotic life of her own” (Connolly 98) – once again putting her autonomy in question.

Furthermore, what Humbert believes he is subjecting sleeping Lolita to is “my enchanted voyage,” (Nabokov 146) not an act of abuse on a helpless child, as he concludes that “the gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets – *not* crime’s prowling ground” (149). He is obviously tormented and discouraged by Lolita shifting between sleep and wakefulness, and, as a result, is incapable of pursuing his intentions, until, at the break of dawn he reveals that “it was she who seduced me” (150). He reiterates how a mischievous Lolita instigates the first kiss, and then, takes charge by saying “here is where we start” (151). All the while, Humbert appears to be at her mercy and lets

¹⁴ At this moment he rejoices, fascinated by “how fast the magic potion worked!” (138), an exclamation which perpetuates his delirious fantasy: that the current events are a part of some kind of magical world, that Lolita is a Sleeping Beauty, not a drugged child, and, therefore, no “real” harm has been done to her.

“her have her way – at least while I could still bear it” (ibid.). This latter comment, however, suggests that at a certain point his ability to “bear” it is disrupted and eventually, as Connolly points out, Humbert “took the initiative and had *his way*” (Connolly 102). Similarly, Elizabeth Patnoe observes that Humbert’s description of the occurrence is not only unreliable, but also doubled because he is “being one thing and pretending to be another,” (Patnoe 92) meaning that while his discourse frames him as being ignorant of and oblivious to Lolita’s behaviour, his actions confirm his malicious intent: “He ‘feigns’ sleep and ‘imitates’ waking; he feigns ‘supreme stupidity’ and ignores Lolita’s difficulties during the act; he says he is not concerned with ‘sex’ at all, but we know that compels him” (ibid.). What Humbert’s discourse discloses in this instance is his inclination to obscure what actually happens with what justifies his behaviour. For if Dolores is the one who acts, and, even, takes “advantage” of his ignorance and inexperience, then him having “his way” with her later is not an immoral or a traumatizing act. As a result, in Humbert’s mind, Lolita is not a passive victim of his abuse, but an active participant in what he calls an act of “making love”.

The following day Lolita is temperamental and disagreeable, and Humbert is concerned that he is “sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed” (Nabokov 158). Upon a brief reflection, he concludes that, after all, Lolita is “a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (ibid.). Nevertheless, despite this observation, Humbert’s primary concern remains that “her mood might prevent me from making love to her again” (ibid.). What this suggests is that Humbert’s awareness of his transgression is obfuscated by his inability to perceive both traumatic and traumatizing behaviour, or, as Gibbons observes, “the impossibility of properly representing the experience of pain, whether one’s own or that of another” (Gibbons 59). Thus, Humbert is unable to recognize that what he considers to be an act of “making love” is, actually, an act of trauma for Dolores, and it is through his discourse that such obfuscation is made possible. In addition, he places his physical desires at the forefront of his motivations, and, at the same time, neglects Lolita’s emotional needs. Throughout all this, Dolores is oblivious to her mother’s death. Upset with Humbert, she demands to know the phone number of the hospital her mother is allegedly staying in, to which Humbert calmly replies, “your mother is dead” (Nabokov 160). With this news (and to Humbert’s delight), Dolores’ disagreeable disposition disappears and “in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine [room], and we made it up very gently” (ibid.). Humbert

concludes this part of his narrative with an ominous observation of Dolores' predicament: "She had absolutely nowhere else to go" (ibid.). Alone, an orphan, Lolita is essentially at Humbert's mercy.

I suggest that unacknowledged tragic losses of, first, his mother and then, Annabel, subconsciously lead to Humbert's desensitization to Charlotte's death, as well as to Dolores' experience of trauma, provoked by her mother's passing, as well as his abuse. As a result, Humbert's point of view on trauma remains unchanged and his dismissive approach to traumatic breaks in his own life engenders Dolores' traumatization. To recall Gibbons, what Humbert experiences is an indication of the "inability to integrate the [traumatic] event" (Gibbons 74) – the deaths of his mother, and Annabel. Humbert's discourse reveals that while he is capable of understanding that Dolores may be emotionally affected by such a tragic event, he perceives her emotional outburst to be an inconvenience, a behaviour of a disagreeable child, rather than an expression of trauma, largely because his own traumatic experience is unrecognized. However, Dolores' trauma extends far beyond the loss of her mother – it is also exacerbated by Humbert's deceit and subsequent abuse. I believe that what allows him to dismiss Dolores as a victim and ignore her traumatization is precisely the manner in which his discourse shapes her identity. For Humbert, Lolita is, first and foremost, a nymphet, a magical creature of his fantasy, and a personification of his desires, capable of putting a spell on him and succumbing him to her will. She is also endowed with a double nature, a mixture of "tender dreamy childness and a kind of eerie vulgarity," (Nabokov 48) which implies that, according to his perception of her, she is neither pure nor innocent, and, thus, untainted by his behaviour. By tearing away at her childlike disposition and innocence, and falsely according her a degree of control over him that she actually does not possess, Humbert sets a precedent for his own justification. In his mind, Dolores is neither abused nor traumatized by him (or, for that matter, by Charlotte's death), and by extension, not a victim.

The question of victimhood with its moral and ethical implications is crucial in the discussion of Humbert's transgressive behaviour. From the preceding analysis, Humbert appears to exhibit traits of both a traumatized subject (due to his inability and denial to process traumatic events in his life) and an abuser (because of his mistreatment of Dolores). With a clear negation of Dolores' status as a victim, where does Humbert himself fall on the scale of our understanding of victimhood? If he is a traumatized subject and an abuser, is he also a victim? In the following, I briefly return to literary trauma theory in order

to discuss the elusive question of victimhood, keeping Humbert, as well as his transgressions, in mind.

2.4 Humbert Humbert, the Question of Victimhood, and Perpetrator Trauma

Throughout the last three decades, Western perception of the notions of *victim* and *victimhood* has changed and developed: its original meaning denoting a victim of a sacrificial or religious ritual has given way to a more modern and general understanding of “a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action,” according to a 2018 definition of the *Oxford Living English Dictionaries* (Onega 92). Nevertheless, the question of victimhood, with its moral and ethical implications, remains opaque. In her discussion on the changing definition of the term, Susana Onega points out the difficulty: on one hand of misrepresenting victimhood by associating it with sacrifice, and, on the other, of the refusal of survivors to identify with the term that implies passivity and powerlessness (94). Onega suggests that this may lead to a “society’s tendency to change its attitude to victims of trauma or loss if they do not fulfil their expected sacrificial roles, [and] may be said to evince a lack of empathy for the suffering of others” (ibid.). In other words, if one fails to behave in a predetermined manner expected of a victim, one risks facing a negative attitude to (or, even, a dismissal of) their suffering. What Onega’s remarks bring to the fore is the contradictory and restrictive nature of the terms *victim* and *victimhood* employed by contemporary literary trauma theorists – an observation which is further exemplified by a similar approach that critics and scholars harbour towards the notion of the *perpetrator trauma*.

Briefly mentioned in the introduction, the term perpetrator trauma poses a vexing problem. Erin McGlothin observes that scholars of trauma not only tend to exclusively focus on “the victim as the sole sufferer of the traumatic effects of violence,” (McGlothin 100) but also only on those victims that deserve sympathy – “we empathize with those who are seen as the most deserving of our empathy” (Leake qtd. in McGlothin ibid.). As a result, our understanding of trauma “has shifted from a neutral category that identifies an experience that is universal ... to a label that validates ... the suffering of those whose experiences warrant recognition” (Mohamed qtd. in McGlothin ibid.). This suggests that research into the literary representation of the nuances of trauma (as well as those of victimhood) is restricted by our moral and ethical boundaries, resulting in the absence of “literary representations of perpetration” (McGlothin 101). Ultimately, this leads to a misconception, observed by

Whitehead, that only those that identify with the label of a victim are capable of suffering trauma, and, thus, merit our sympathy. More importantly, McGlothlin notes that the ambiguity of the perpetrator trauma prompts “profound moral contradictions,” (Morag qtd. in McGlothlin 108) resulting, first, in the lack of understanding of different manifestations of trauma in perpetrators, and second, in the implied absence of moral accountability for their actions. While the discussion on the perpetrator trauma (and victimhood) is inconclusive and warrants closer scrutiny, it offers an interesting framework through which to examine more controversial cases of traumatization, such as, for example, Humbert Humbert’s.

As can be concluded from the aforementioned discussion, what Humbert inadvertently reveals in his memoir is that his narrative is full of contradictions about himself and the world: he is an innocent hero and a brute villain; his intentions are fuelled by virtuous proclamations and actions that refute them; and, finally, he is both a traumatized subject and an abuser. In his recollections, Humbert shifts between acknowledging his abuse towards Dolores (which is usually either immediately dismissed by him or diminished in significance) and condemning her for his behaviour. Moreover, he is torn between accepting Dolores as a victim and an active participant in her own traumatization: on one hand, this dilemma occurs due to his own unacknowledged trauma and, on the other, due to Lolita’s “failure” to conform to his idea of what constitutes a victim – he continuously reiterates the sentiment that she is neither “pure” nor passive in her demeanour. Nevertheless, while Humbert denies Dolores her status as a victim, he is adamant that his actions be judged with “impartial sympathy,” (Nabokov 63) and is insistent that he has been subjugated by Dolores’ nymphic aura to behave in a certain manner. Thus, Humbert Humbert’s conduct falls under what McGlothlin describes as the symptomatology of the perpetrator trauma, which includes such symptoms as “anxiety, panic, depression, irritability and physical complaints” (McGlothlin 107). From certain actions and behaviours described in his memoir, one can discern that Humbert is indeed irritable and anxious, and suffers from numerous mental breakdowns. For instance, he admits that on one occasion “a dreadful breakdown sent me to a sanatorium for more than a year; I went back to my work – only to be hospitalized again” (Nabokov 34). In addition, his *pavor nocturnus*, or sleep terrors, are reminiscent of “intrusive imagery in the form of unwanted thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks,” (McGlothlin *ibid.*) which plague those suffering from perpetrator trauma (*ibid.*). Yet, more importantly, this particular trauma manifests itself in avoidance and neutralizations, such as “denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim,” (Presser and Sandberg qtd. in McGlothlin 107) as well as

rationalizations used by the perpetrators to “rationalize their acts – to justify them as the right thing to do or to excuse them as forgivable or understandable in light of the circumstances” (Mohamed qtd. in McGlothlin *ibid.*). Indeed, Humbert’s memoir partially functions as a platform for justification and rationalization of his behaviour – he seeks to excuse his transgressive conduct under the guise of a confession.

However, what Humbert fails to account for is that his experiences of trauma, be it unacknowledged childhood trauma or implied perpetrator trauma, do not vindicate him from his abusive demeanour towards Dolores and other women. Rothberg’s statement, mentioned in the introduction, that trauma “should not be a category that confirms moral value” (Rothberg 90) supports the idea that all kinds of trauma, including perpetrator trauma, deserve recognition and scrutiny. Yet, according to McGlothlin, the recognition of the perpetrator trauma “should not change how we view their [those suffering from perpetrator trauma] moral responsibility and legal culpability for their crimes” (*ibid.*). Thus, McGlothlin’s observation suggests that Humbert, in his own suffering from trauma, should not be acquitted of physical abuse of Dolores, despite his insistence on being judged with “impartial sympathy” (Nabokov 63). Such debate on morality of perpetrator trauma can prompt a difficult question of who is the victim in *Lolita*? From an obvious perspective, it is Dolores – an orphaned child under the control of her abusive caretaker, and from the other – Humbert Humbert – an “unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentleman” (98) suffering from mental breakdowns and depressions.¹⁵ Despite the inconclusiveness of the definition of victimhood, McGlothlin’s remarks occasion an interpretation that both characters in the novel can function as victims in their own right, regardless of where their positions fall on the scale of our understanding of what constitutes a victim.

2.5 Chapter Summary

Overall, this chapter has been primarily concerned with Humbert Humbert and his discourse on trauma, abuse, and victimhood. The first part of the chapter has focused on disclosing traumatic occurrences in Humbert’s early childhood in order to observe their belated effect on his present narrative. This chapter has suggested that Humbert’s unacknowledged childhood trauma – the deaths of his mother, his aunt, and particularly, Annabel – affects his conduct towards women later in life, and manifests in abusive, violent, and exploitative behaviour. Here, I have argued that Humbert’s trauma frames him as a traumatized subject.

¹⁵ Interestingly, neither Dolores nor Humbert consider the other to be the victim.

Meanwhile, the second part of the chapter has discussed a particular scene in the novel – Charlotte’s death – and how Humbert’s ignorance of his own traumatic losses prevents him from allowing Dolores to mourn and grieve her mother. In addition, this part of the chapter has pointed out that Humbert’s deceit and abuse of Dolores’ vulnerability at a critical moment in her life is partially justified by him due to his perception of her as, first and foremost, a magical nymphet, and second, as an active participant in their sexual relationship, not a passive victim of his abuse. Here, I have pointed out that Humbert’s demeanour towards Dolores presents him as an abuser. Finally, the chapter has concluded with an observation on the ambiguity of the question of victimhood, as well as the role of perpetrator trauma in determining the validity of one’s trauma, and, consequently, one’s status as a victim. I have suggested that, despite the inconclusiveness of the terms *victim* and *victimhood*, McGlothin’s observations point to a presumption that both Dolores and Humbert can figure as victims.

3 Chapter Two: Humbert Humbert's Discourse on Nostalgia

In his article on "The World of Nostalgia," Edward S. Casey fittingly notes that nostalgia, as a concept, evokes a multitude of interesting and challenging questions:

To begin with, what are we nostalgic *about* – what is the proper object of nostalgia? Indeed, *is* there a definite object of nostalgia such as a thing or a person, or is it a question of something quite indefinite such as an ambiance or an atmosphere? ... Do we get nostalgic over the past as *past* ... or do we become nostalgic only when a remnant of the past lingers into the present. (Casey 361)

Casey's observations foreground the ambiguity and complexity of the term: nostalgia seems to elude straightforward answers to its direct object, as well as its temporality. Boym similarly observes that not only "the alluring object of nostalgia is notoriously elusive" (Boym xiv) but also that nostalgia appears to not be directed either towards the future or the past "but rather sideways" (ibid.). As a result of this, "the nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space," (ibid.) suggesting that nostalgia affects a regular perception of chronological time. In addition, Boym points out that nostalgia poses a risk and a danger: "The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one," and, also, that "unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters" (xvi). In the memoir, Humbert sometimes compares himself to an image of a monster, "a great and insane monster" (Nabokov 140) or "a pentapod monster" (324) to be exact, which warrants a question if his monstrous characteristics are, to a certain extent, rooted in his unreflected nostalgia? With Boym's and Casey's remarks in mind, the present chapter examines Humbert Humbert's confrontation with the "elusive" and "dangerous" concept of nostalgia, and discusses particular thresholds and crises in his life that inform, and are informed, by this notion. The first part of the chapter utilizes Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia with its weight on the return home - *nostos*, and discusses Humbert's inability to return to a mythical home of his childhood – a home of Hotel Mirana, the aura of which he seeks to evoke during his numerous stays with Lolita in different hotels across America. The second part of the chapter examines Boym's observations on reflective nostalgia, lingering in pain - *algia*, which functions as an incentive for Humbert to immortalize his memories about Dolores and their past in writing. Throughout the chapter, Annabel appears as an underlying precondition to his longing.

3.1 Humbert Humbert's Discourse on the World of Hotel Mirana

Humbert's earliest and happiest childhood recollections, supplanted by his creative imagination, seem to have originated in the Hotel Mirana, his own "private universe, [and] a whitewashed cosmos within the blue greater one that blazed outside" (8). Humbert boasts of the rich world of Hotel Mirana and his childhood surrounded by "illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces" (ibid.). From his written recollections, Humbert appears to have been well-liked among guests and residents of the hotel: "Everybody liked me, everybody petted me" (9) he claims, and in his father's absence, he essentially roams free in the area. An English day school which he attends is in a close vicinity to home, and Humbert seemingly thrives there, excelling at learning and forming perfect relationships with his teachers and schoolmates. Moreover, his love for the place is elevated by his new neighbour, Annabel, who moves in a villa not far from Hotel Mirana with her parents, and with whom he sparks an intimate friendship. I believe that Humbert's musings about the other-worldliness of Hotel Mirana reveal an interesting detail: it appears as though his early perception of the world around him is restricted to and limited by the grounds of his father's hotel – a fairytalelike place, where he is loved, wanted, and successful. I suggest here that perhaps Humbert's memories of Hotel Mirana function as a sort of *screen memory*. Freud describes screen memory as "a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and the other, that has been suppressed," (Freud 22) thus it "shades the forgotten scene of private trauma or revelation" (Boym 54). Humbert inadvertently reveals ("screens") his own childhood trauma through his recollections of Mirana as a place of happiness and joy, simultaneously contradicting them with his remembrances of tragic losses experienced in his childhood. Those memories seem to "shade" and "suppress" the prevalent trauma resulting from the deaths of his mother, his aunt, and Annabel. Consequently, their deaths are not consciously linked to the place and thus, his trauma of loss is neither grounded nor acknowledged. Rather, Hotel Mirana functions as an imagined paradise with its own distinctly delineated borders. This also suggests that Humbert is already in a dangerous proximity to the risk posed by nostalgia, pointed out by Boym, where the distinction between his actual home and the imaginary one is opaque. Curiously, Humbert's descriptions of his childhood in Hotel Mirana amount to only a few pages, yet they seem to linger in and permeate his entire memoir.

What is curious about Humbert's recollections of the place is that he seems to not necessarily be nostalgic towards Hotel Mirana as a physical site, that is, the building itself, but both as a perceived childhood home and a "private universe," where he is unhindered in

his conduct and can freely pursue his desires. In “World of Nostalgia,” Casey distinguishes between different senses of place, two of which, namely *place-in-particular* and a *meta* place, I believe may resonate with Humbert’s perception of Hotel Mirana. *Place-in-particular* denotes a site, such as a childhood home, where a locus of an action occurs (e.g., Humbert’s loss of his mother and Annabel, or his first sexual encounters). Meanwhile, a *meta* place as “the object not of perception or recollection but of reflection ... becomes the universe itself, the place of *all* places” (Casey 378). For Humbert, it appears, Hotel Mirana is both: a locus of action *and* a limitless universe. Casey broadly refers to such places as “a world, a way of life, a mode of being-in-the-world” (363). Humbert’s mode of being in the world relies profoundly on his freedom to behave in a manner that is not obstructed by moral and ethical values propagated by others. For Humbert, at least to a certain degree, the beauty and magic of Hotel Mirana is sustained by his belief that he is not a brute or a monster – in his private universe of Mirana, he is praised and adored by those around him. Casey further notes that “in being nostalgic, what we seem to miss, to lack or need, is a world as it was once established in a place” (ibid.). This can be brought to bear on Humbert’s own nostalgic desire to immortalize an image of his perceived childhood home as its own separate universe, a world within a world, physically grounded in Hotel Mirana.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Humbert records his memories of Mirana from a place beyond the borders of his childhood’s “private universe” – a prison - which suggests that he is capable of reflecting on the *aura* of Hotel Mirana not only from a temporal, but a spatial distance as well. This recalls Walter Benjamin’s discussion on the characteristics of “aura” in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” (1935) where he describes aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin 5). I suggest that for Humbert, the magical aura of Hotel Mirana is amplified precisely because of his distance to it. This also resonates with Boym’s observations that nostalgia, in particular, relies on such a distance (Boym 70) to evoke nostalgic sentiments, and, in addition, is at the core of “an ache of temporal distance and displacement” (44). As a result of temporal and spatial distance, Humbert obviously experiences nostalgic sentiments towards Hotel Mirana, which, together with distorted screen memories, further reinforce his inability to distinguish between Mirana as his actual home and an imaginary site.

In addition, Humbert is not only distanced from his childhood home, but is unable to physically return to it. This seems to contradict Casey’s idea that “the *nostos* that is occasioning so much *algos* or pain – the very source of the homesickness with which nostalgia is often equated in dictionaries – is a return to a homeplace” (Casey 363). I suggest

that in Humbert's case it is not the *nostos* (the return) itself that occasions pain and suffering, but, rather, the *inability* and *impossibility* of a return. Boym elaborates on this in her observations on modern nostalgia. She explains that nostalgia reflects both a "mourning for the impossibility of mythical return," and also "[a mourning] for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (Boym 8). First and foremost, for Humbert, the impossibility of a return is amplified by the aforementioned distance. He pursues studies abroad and then travels extensively throughout Europe, before departing for the United States, and, later, he learns that Hotel Mirana is no longer under the ownership of his family – "the Mirana had been sold long ago," (Nabokov 25) he recounts. I suggest that Humbert's fleeting comment about the status of Hotel Mirana recalls Bakhtin's chronotope of threshold – it is a moment of crisis, albeit unacknowledged, which moves Humbert's narrative in a direction of pursuit of a concrete, as well as a metaphorical, site of his imagined childhood memories. What is important to note is that Bakhtin's chronotopes emphasize "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships," (Bakhtin 84) where "time ... takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time," (ibid.) meaning that time and space become inseparable. I argue that Humbert is faced precisely with such a dilemma and for him Hotel Mirana is both a spatial and a temporal object – it signifies both a place and a time of his childhood. Thus, with the loss of a physical place (the building and its surroundings), Humbert also loses an opportunity to return to a metaphorical location of his private universe.

What is more, Humbert's nostalgia is magnified by the inability to return to a world he has known as a child, "with clear borders and values" (Boym 8). Therefore, the object of his nostalgia is "beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped" (13). As he recounts his travels, he becomes discontented with contemporary cultural sentiments and judgements, and often describes past attitudes to similar issues that contradict modern ideas (e.g., the debate on the legal age of marriage). For Humbert, it seems that the values of the contemporary world are too complex, unstable, and prone to swift changes – an observation which makes him feel uncertain and anxious. In a certain manner, what he is obviously nostalgic towards is the stability of his perceived childhood values. He desires to return to the frozen time of Hotel Mirana, where his only concerns have revolved around satisfying his curiosities, not attempting to suppress them. Thus, the nostalgia that inadvertently plagues him throughout his memoir is a longing for both a physical site of his childhood, as well as a more conceptual

universe of predetermined values and fantasies, “a longing for a place” but also “a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams” (xv).

In her remarks on restorative nostalgia, which lingers in nostos, Boym emphasizes that this type of nostalgia “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” and “manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past,” (41) in other words, according to Boym, restorative nostalgia foregrounds a restoration of physical memorials of the past. Here, I suggest that Humbert may not actually desire to rebuild a *physical* site of his childhood home, but rather to reconstruct the aforementioned *aura* of the place. In the following, I examine Humbert’s discourse surrounding his many stays in different hotels, and how the aura of those transitory places, propelled by nostalgia, allows him to return for a brief moment within the otherworldly borders of Hotel Mirana.

3.2 Humbert Humbert on the Aura of Transitory Places

In his memoir, Humbert recounts numerous stays in different hotels during his travels with (and later, in search of) Lolita: “I registered, if not actually stayed, at 342 hotels, motels, and tourist homes” (Nabokov 282). Adella Irizarry in her discussion of themes of exile, loss, and constructed reality in *Lolita* notes that hotels and resort towns seem to function as “places of transience,” (Irizarry 2) where “people stay for a night, a week, or a season; employees come and go, and economies are built on a desire to produce temporary, isolated happiness – as well as the natural homes of multinational experience” (ibid.). For Humbert, Hotel Mirana is not only a physical site of his childhood home, but also a metaphorical universe where he has spent most of his formative years in “isolated happiness”. It, too, has attracted a number of transient people, such as “elderly American ladies” and “ruined Russian princesses,” (Nabokov 9) who have graced his father’s company with their presence, before continuing on with their voyage. In my view, Humbert mistakenly merges the aura of Hotel Mirana (and its otherworldly transience) with an atmosphere of an enchanted “private universe” of his own. His nostalgia is thus propagated by “a romance of [his] own fantasy,” (Boym xiii) a fantasy where Hotel Mirana equals a mythical “private universe”. After all, he admits that “treasured recollections of my father’s palatial hotel sometimes led me to seek for its like in the strange country we travelled through,” (Nabokov 165) which suggests that it is precisely the aura, the *like*, of Hotel Mirana that he is in a desperate pursuit of.

Soon after Charlotte’s death, Humbert embarks on a journey across America with Lolita: “We are now setting out on a long happy journey,” (238) he contends. However, the

purpose of the trip is more sinister than Humbert lets on – it is during their “happy journey” that he exploits Lolita’s vulnerability and subjects her to physical and mental abuse. One of the first hotels they visit is The Enchanted Hunters, previously suggested to him by Charlotte as a possible destination for their vacation. Its folkloristic and fantastic name aside, The Enchanted Hunters turns out to be a mediocre residence: with its old clientele, “a parody of a hotel corridor” (134) and a pretentious dining room “with maudlin murals depicting enchanted hunters in various postures and states of enchantment amid a medley of pallid animals, dryads and trees,” (137) it is indeed a bleak image compared to the richness and grandeur of Hotel Mirana. However, it is the “seductive name” (122) combined with the “hermetic seclusion” (127) of The Enchanted Hunters that captivate Humbert, as though its atmosphere transports him within the spatial and temporal borders of Hotel Mirana, his magical “island of utopia,” (Boym 13) frozen in space and time. Thus, Humbert is enchanted, under the spell of the aura, suggested by the magical name of the hotel, as well as its location. Unsurprisingly then, The Enchanted Hunters functions as a background for Humbert’s unrestrained conduct and it is here that he finally satisfies his physical desires at the expense of Lolita’s bodily autonomy. I suggest that perhaps for him the fairytalelike aura of the moment evokes nostalgic memories of his childhood happiness, where The Enchanted Hunters functions as the Hotel Mirana, and Lolita inadvertently plays the role of Annabel. Thus, his past unacknowledged trauma materializes itself in the present moment of experience.

One other place they briefly inhabit bears the title of Mirana Motel, upon recognition of which Humbert exclaims “(Mirana!)” (Nabokov 258). Again, the image of Hotel Mirana that Humbert evokes is confined within parentheses and, in a certain manner, restricted in meaning. In my view, what Humbert avoids acknowledging is that Mirana exists outside of the boundaries (parentheses) of his imagined perception – it is both a place of joy, as well as trauma, which he fails to confront as such. In a way, this is a reminder of Humbert’s conceptualization of his mother’s death, where this traumatic experience is restricted to the boundaries of two images in parentheses - to move beyond the delineated borders of those parentheses implies a certain acknowledgement of his trauma, which Humbert is unwilling to admit. In addition, the magical aura of the place (and name) allows him to experience a moment of unrestrained joy mixed with an air of desperation (“the poignant sweetness of sobbing atonement, groveling love, the hopelessness of sensual reconciliation” (ibid.)) and, more importantly, proclaim self-sacrifice to Lolita. It is here, in Mirana Motel, that Humbert

immolates himself, admitting, however, that his belated sacrifice is “all to no avail. Both doomed were we” (ibid.). I suggest that Humbert’s sacrifice is reminiscent of his devotion to Annabel – he surrenders to Dolores in the same manner he relinquished himself to Annabel some twenty-five years ago. Curiously, this revelation of self-sacrifice fails to discourage Humbert from further abuse of Lolita’s innocence.

Another interesting find during their travels is a photograph of Hotel Mirana, which Humbert encounters in a museum among post cards of different hotels: “With a hot wave of pride I discovered a colored photo of my father’s Mirana, its striped awnings, its flag flying above the retouched palm trees” (175). Oddly, this is the first time that Humbert points out physical attributes of the hotel, rather than its perceived grandeur or a magical atmosphere - perhaps wishing to ground the lost object in concrete details. In addition, Humbert observes that the picture is “colored” with “retouched” objects, and, here I suggest that it is not the absence of colour that signifies the loss of vitality of an object, “emphasising a sense of other-worldliness” as noted by Gibbons (40), but precisely the imposition of colour that creates such an aura. It seems as though the picture is intentionally altered and improved to disguise the loss of the object photographed, as well as to artificially restore its liveliness. Boym observes that a function of a photograph is that of a memento mori (Boym 264), and I suggest that this picture of Hotel Mirana reminds Humbert of the “death” of his childhood site, despite his wish to alter and restore it through his imagined recollections. Dolores’ reaction to the photograph is dismissive, the disinterested “so what?” (Nabokov 175) rupturing Humbert’s excitement. What is interesting to note is that Humbert shares the picture with Dolores at all, since she has no sentimental or nostalgic attachment to the place. After all, it is Annabel whose ghostly presence is entwined with the aura of Hotel Mirana, not Lolita. This indicates that Humbert believes that what he has embarked upon is a “happy journey” with his long-lost childhood love, and not a desperate attempt at solipsizing an orphaned child.

For Humbert, such transitory places as hotels, town inns, and motels create an aura of anonymity, which he is quick to exploit. Irizarry fittingly observes that Humbert is aware of “the anonymity of American travel culture,” (Irizarry 5) with its “blur of similar, personality-less hotel and motel rooms, ... a world that, like his father’s hotel, is built on temporary and isolated happiness” (ibid.). Upon every arrival, Humbert disguises his and Lolita’s identities by changing their names and Lolita’s actual age, and attempts to perform fictitious roles of a father and a daughter. He prefers the convenience and unchangeability of “the Functional

Motel” (Nabokov 163) with its “clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, [and] insatiable illicit love” (ibid.) to the grandeur of old hotels, which boast of originality and uniqueness. At first, he is concerned with raising suspicion among guests and employees with his conduct, but soon learns that no one is especially preoccupied with them.¹⁶ I suggest that it is the air of anonymity of such places that allows Humbert to metaphorically return to the site of Hotel Mirana; their lack of distinctiveness and the promise of anonymity function as a blank canvass on which he projects whatever constructed realities he reimagines.

Thus, Humbert’s discourse reveals his underlying nostalgia towards the past world of Hotel Mirana, the site of which he cannot return to, and the aura of which he seeks to evoke by clinging to minutiae details he encounters throughout his travels. Casey notes that what makes a person nostalgic is “a wish to re-enter, *per impossibile*, the past of a world that has effectively vanished from our lives and of which we are painfully reminded by its extant traces” (Casey 365). It is precisely the unreachability of the past that Humbert is preoccupied with - he cannot return to the past when he was loved and adored; or to the past when his values, beliefs and behaviours were not challenged by moral and ethical sentiments of others; or to the past when Annabel was still alive, and he was not haunted by her image and aura. Therefore, he seeks out traces of the past world in the *like* (the aura) of transient places, while Dolores functions as a physical connection to his past relationship with Annabel. Once again, it is his unacknowledged trauma in regard to Annabel’s death that leads him on a path to self-destruction, and a consequent traumatization of Dolores. What is more, it is not a physical place of Hotel Mirana, as mentioned above, that functions as the source of his nostalgia, but more so the memory of it. Boym recalls André Aciman’s notion of *rememoration* to explain that it is precisely “the memory of a place, and not the place itself, [that] becomes a subject of remembrance” (Boym 303). For Humbert, recollections of the site of his childhood amplify his nostalgic sentiments, and it is only through his memories that he can return to Hotel Mirana.

In the following, I move beyond Humbert’s nostalgia lingering in Mirana to discuss a different type of nostalgia, which informs his discourse. Reflective nostalgia, with its concern for “irrevocability of the past and human finitude” (49) and particular interest in the passage of time, is pervasive in Humbert’s narrative centred on his loss of Lolita: first, as a

¹⁶ That is until Humbert encounters Quilty in *The Enchanted Hunters*, and Quilty’s particular interest in Dolores unsettles Humbert and shatters his veil of anonymity.

consequence of her escape with Quilty and later, due to her metaphorical death exacerbated by her pregnancy. An expression of his longing is vivid in his memories of their past, and functions as an incentive for him to immortalize her, as well as his recollections of her, in writing. Here, Annabel also appears as a fundamental element of his nostalgia.

3.3 Humbert Humbert on Lolita's Escape

Dolores, trapped in the endless cycle of physical and mental abuse, on several occasions attempts to escape Humbert's control, which only gives precedence to his abusive and erratic conduct. He feels persecuted by numerous police officers and detectives, and is suspicious and wary of Lolita's behaviour. At times, he even questions his own sanity, until he concludes that "it was becoming abundantly clear that all those identical detectives in prismaticly changing cars were figments of my persecution mania, recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance" (Nabokov 271). Shortly afterwards, Dolores becomes ill and is rushed to the hospital, and it is then that Humbert is physically separated from her for the first time since her abduction: "While I was not looking, my child was taken away from me!" (273), he calls out in desperation. In this moment of crisis, Humbert finally becomes aware of the possibility of her loss, a realization which stuns and numbs him. I suggest that for Humbert, albeit subconsciously, this particular moment is in a way reminiscent of Annabel's death who perishes suddenly and unexpectedly of typhus, far away from him. Such symptoms of illness that Dolores exhibits (high fever, painful stiffness, and chills) are eerily similar to the symptoms of typhus. Amplified by their separation, the threat of Dolores' death and the trauma of loss of his childhood beloved looms over Humbert throughout the duration of her stay in the hospital. However, it is not illness that snatches Lolita away from him, but her own determination to escape him.

Humbert learns of Lolita's escape from a hospital receptionist, who informs him that her uncle, Mr. Gustave, has picked her up from the hospital the day before, and "told them to tell me [Humbert] I should not worry, and keep warm, they were at Grandpa's ranch as agreed" (280). Of course, Mr. Gustave is a fictional figure, which Humbert is aware of, and the realization that Lolita has been "stolen" from him sends him into a fit of violence. He is determined to exact his revenge on the perpetrator, as he is "free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother" (281). Humbert spends the next three years following clues left by Quilty in search of Lolita, desperate to reunite with her. In his memoir, he describes this time of tribulation as if "a side door crashing open in life's full flight, and a rush of roaring black

time drowning with its whipping wind the cry of a lone disaster” (289). For him, the “three empty years” (288) are only distinguished by “a few pertinent points,” (ibid.) but even so, the time seems to have passed at an incredible pace. In his remarks on the chronotope of threshold, Bakhtin points out the instantaneousness of time and the seeming absence of its duration, which enshrouds Humbert: he is trapped in this swift passage of time, unable to step over the threshold into reality. Thus, I suggest that what Humbert experiences at this moment of time is a state of *liminality*, a transitional period of in-between, “in which the individual acquires the experience of becoming completely obscure and detached from reality” (Ratiani 1). From Latin word *limen* denoting “a threshold,” liminality is concerned with a transition across borders – it is “a corridor between two different places” (ibid.). In my view, Humbert’s loss of Lolita signifies his inability to cross “the corridor” from one place (before Lolita’s disappearance) to another (after his loss of her). In this particular moment, with the instantaneous passage of time, Humbert is unable to step over that liminal space into “the after” of his loss of Lolita, and is thus suspended in the in-between. Similarly, Boym observes such passage and duration of time as she remarks that it is reflective nostalgia that allows nostalgics to “take sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars” (Boym 49). Thus, Humbert seems to nostalgically linger within the boundaries of that time. However, he does not calculate it according to a biographical passage, but rather through a distinction of “a few pertinent points” (Nabokov 288) or, in Boym’s words, “details and memorial signs” (Boym 49) that figure as focal points in his recollection of that period. He eventually admits that “I was merely losing contact with reality,” (Nabokov 290) meaning, perhaps, that his nostalgic perception of time has disturbed his comprehension of reality as well.

At this time, Humbert is, once again, riddled with contradictions: on one hand, he is determined to pursue Dolores and exact his revenge on Quilty and, on the other, he is quick to discard any reminders of her presence: “I collected these sundry belongings ... and on her fifteenth birthday mailed everything as an anonymous gift to a home for orphaned girls” (ibid.). He admits that he seldom dreams about her, and, at the same time, she haunts his “daymares and insomnias” (289). For him, she is still his Lolita, but she appears in his mind in the images of Valeria and Charlotte, his first and second wives. He composes a poem dedicated to her, and then loses himself in the poetry of others. Finally (and almost shamefully), he discloses that “my accursed nature could not change, no matter how my love for her did,” (293) confessing that he still seeks out other nymphets. This suggests that

perhaps Humbert is no longer enchanted by Lolita as a singular object of his desires but is rather captivated by the distance her escape has created. Boym elaborates on this by observing that reflective nostalgia is “enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself,” (Boyms 50) meaning that a nostalgia for a concrete object is replaced by a nostalgia for a distance. After all, distance is precisely what allows one to appreciate the aura of the object. However, while distance is a condition of longing, it is the longing itself that is at the root of reflective nostalgia, and it is this longing that is instrumental in Humbert’s nostalgia for Dolores.

3.4 Humbert Humbert on Lolita’s Metaphorical Death, and Memory as an Element of Longing

Some time after their separation, Humbert receives a letter from Lolita. In the letter, she informs him that she is, in fact, married to Richard F. Schiller and is expecting a baby. At its core, the letter is a plea for a financial help and, while she withholds her actual address of residence from him, she encourages Humbert to respond to her correspondence: “Write, please. I have gone through much sadness and hardship” (Nabokov 304). Humbert, emboldened by Dolores’ request for help, embarks on a journey to find her and rid her of the source of her hardships. What he encounters when he finally reaches his destination is a physically aged and changed Lolita: “Her head looked smaller, and her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed” (307). Thus, the *real* Lolita, to Humbert’s disappointment, emerges as a bleak figure in comparison to the image of her he has cultivated over the years in his imagination. Mathew Winston observes that, since the beginning, “Humbert desperately and pitifully attempts to stop the movement of time, which presents him with the threat of his enchanting nymphet metamorphosing into an ordinary woman” (Winston 425). At this meeting, Humbert is confronted with this looming threat – with the unrelenting passage of time and its unforgiving effect on Lolita’s body - and his reaction to it is to commiserate on the metaphorical death of his nymphet.

In his article on discursive killings in *Lolita*, Philipp Schweighauser notes that upon seeing Dolores for the first time since their separation, Humbert “explicitly equates her [Dolores’] pregnancy with death,” (Schweighauser 264) when he confides that “the moment, the death I had kept conjuring up for three years was as simple as a bit of dry wood. She was frankly and hugely pregnant” (Nabokov 307). Physically, Lolita is altered beyond his

conceptualization of how a nymphet looks: she is older, weary, and already metaphorically dead - she is essentially his biggest fear materialized. It is important to note that for Humbert, Lolita's physical appearance is integral to his preoccupation with her. As Schweighauser observes in another article "Humbert's visual impressions figure prominently in the narrative, [and that] his voyeuristic obsession with nymphets derives mainly from his fascination with their juvenile bodies" (Schweighauser 160). Humbert's proclamation that "you see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight" (Nabokov 307) supports Schweighauser's remark – it is *sight* that is a precondition for his love for Dolores. Thus, the Lolita he encounters after three years is already (visually) a dead nymphet, and, to him, her morbidly pregnant and exhausted body is a testament to that. After all, he admits that "she was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past" (Nabokov 316). In my view, upon seeing Lolita, Humbert already subconsciously confirms her death as an imagined nymphet, thus propelling his desire to immortalize her physical image in the form of writing, and it is through his memoir that he is capable of revitalizing her original nymphic state. Humbert's confrontation with Lolita's aging presence disrupts his fantasies of their eternal and ethereal love, and I suggest here that it is nostalgia that drives him to cling desperately to any semblance of their past together.

Although, metaphorically, Lolita's physical body is in a state of death and decay, it is Humbert's memory of her that still enchants and captivates him. Faced with the reality of Dolores' physique, he instead concentrates on minutiae details in her conduct and appearance that correspond with his imagined recollections of her. "She made familiar Javanese gestures with her wrists and hands," (308) he observes, and she was "still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine" (317). Thus, Humbert evokes memories of the past in a desperate attempt to recapture Dolores as his nymphet, to which Boym fittingly notes that "reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory" (Boym 49). I suggest that for Humbert, it is those "shattered fragments of memory," albeit imagined, that function as propellants for his nostalgia. Perhaps what he is longing for is not necessarily Dolores as a physical object of his desires, nor even her nymphic or "demoniac" aura, but the *memory* he has created about her. Thus, it is this memory that is at the core of his longing. In his interview with Jim Fleming on memoir and memory, Aciman observes that there is an element of longing in memories: "You long for something that was in the past, that was very important, and then you spend your whole life trying to recover it" (Aciman 2012, par. 7).

Since nostalgia resides in longing, and longing inhabits memories, Humbert's recollections of Dolores function as a manifestation of his yearning for his past.

In her discussion on memory, Boym however also suggests that "only false memories can be totally recalled," (Boym 54) meaning that memory, as a whole, is unstable, unreliable, and subject to falsification. Similarly, in the aforementioned interview Aciman points out that memories are prone to inaccuracies in that "most of our memories are made up of things we wished we had and never got, and so those become memories too" (Aciman 2012, par. 11). Humbert's remembrances of past events do pose a difficulty of distinguishing between actual occurrences and his imagined memories of them, implying perhaps that his vivid and thorough recollections of their (Humbert and Lolita's) past relationship (in particular, moments of their intimacy) are a possible fabrication. Thus, those memories refer to his nostalgia about unrealized wishes and desires, not a longing for actual past. Regardless, the truth and validity of his memories is not a concern for Humbert. Rather, he is preoccupied with convincing Dolores to abandon her current life in exchange for an imagined happiness with him. Lolita's denial of his offer results in a fit of desperation and murderous rage. Following his killing of Quilty, Humbert is imprisoned, and it is here that he nostalgically returns to his past memories, and reexperiences them in writing. As William Anderson fittingly notes, Humbert's memoir is his "cathartic and elaborately wrought reliving of past time from his prison cell" (Anderson 382).

In the final paragraph of his memoir, Humbert addresses Lolita, as if she is, and has been, an active participant in the conversation. He encourages her to love her husband and her child, and not lament Quilty's death. It is evident that Humbert cannot reconcile with their separation, and it is thus through writing a memoir, which is in itself an act of remembering, that he manages to maintain a semblance of a connection with her: "But while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you from here to Alaska" (Nabokov 352) – as if, in such a way, he can eliminate the spatial (and temporal) distance between them.¹⁷ While Humbert is writing his memoir, Lolita is, supposedly, still alive – at least, he addresses her as such. However, he

¹⁷ Perhaps Humbert's need "to still talk" to Dolores, as a result of which he writes the memoir, in a certain manner alludes to an "imperative to tell" of his traumatic past. Dori Laub suggests that "there is, in every survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to *know* one's story" (Laub 63). For Humbert, the *telling* and *knowing* his own traumatic story (and his traumatic thresholds) emerges through a written memoir, where his obsession with Dolores functions as a focal point, while his traumatic past is relegated to secondary memories, obfuscated by trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy.

insists that “this memoir [is] to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive,” (ibid.) and thus “neither of us is alive” (ibid.). Either way, Humbert’s discourse reveals him to be affected by his longing for the past, and thus, in order to protect his memories from erosion, he writes his memoir as a physical monument to them. “And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita,” (ibid.) he concludes. Hence, his memory of her is protected within the borders of his memoir – it is as though it is placed within the parentheses of his recollections. Through writing, he immortalizes his past, his memories, and, more importantly, *his* Lolita without whom his entire story becomes void of purpose and meaning. However, here I return to my observation that there is another figure that precipitates his nostalgia - Annabel, an eerie ghost that haunts his past and present.

3.5 Humbert Humbert on his Longing for Annabel

In the beginning of his memoir, Humbert admits that “there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” (7). While he describes Annabel as a precursor to Lolita and “the initial fateful elf in my life,” (17) her true significance and purpose is ambivalent. In his discussion on intertextuality, anesthetization, and death in *Lolita*, Schweighauser notes that Humbert’s discourse on his childhood love is similar to that of the poetic “I” of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee” (1849). Besides obvious similarities in location of their affairs (Poe’s “kingdom by the sea” (Poe) and Humbert’s “princedom by the sea” (Nabokov 7)), names (both named Annabel), and manners of death (Poe’s Annabel is taken away and entombed in a sepulchre, while Humbert’s Annabel dies of typhus), Schweighauser points out that “Annabel’s whole existence, [Poe’s] poetic ‘I’ implies, acquires meaning only in relation to him” (Schweighauser 258). Likewise, one might argue that Humbert’s Annabel exists solely to produce meaning for his narrative – she is simultaneously a justification for his aberrant obsession with young girls and an explanation of his pursuit of Dolores. Daniel Thomières elaborates on this in his article “Cherchez la Femme: Who Really Was Annabel Leigh?” and suggests that Annabel may not even be a real individual, but rather Humbert’s fantasy, and a “part of the rhetorical devices used by the narrator to exculpate himself” (Thomières 166). Contrary to such interpretations, I view Annabel as an essential and omnipresent figure in Humbert’s memoir, and suggest that the nostalgia present in his narrative is, at least to some extent, amplified by his longing for a disrupted connection with Annabel, as well as a wish to reconnect with his past prior to the trauma of her death.

As mentioned in the discussion above, Humbert's nostalgia is primarily propelled by memories of his childhood at Hotel Mirana, as well as his physical loss of Dolores. In my view, it is Annabel that figures as a common denominator of his nostalgia: she is an integral part of his childhood, while her illness and death are traumatizing factors that anticipate his fear of losing Lolita, and result in his possessive conduct. What Humbert's memoir reveals is his preoccupation with Dolores' physical attributes, particularly those that share similarities with Annabel: it is "the same frail honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair" (Nabokov 41) that excite him. Similarly, Anderson points out that "to rediscover the lost time of Annabel, to perpetuate her memory in frozen urn-time, Humbert projects her image onto any girl of the right age, that is, the same as Annabel's in 1923" (Anderson 368). Humbert's instant recognition of "the features of my dead bride" (Nabokov 42) upon first seeing Lolita further supports this observation. As a result, his desire to freeze the time of his childhood becomes attainable chiefly because he finds fragments in Lolita's appearance that correspond with Annabel's. For Humbert, this revelation erases any traces of their (Humbert and Annabel's) disrupted physical connection some twenty-five-years ago, as though his perception of time has not been severed by her death but rather continues to flow in a steady manner. He admits to this as he concludes that "the twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished" (ibid.).

Despite his observation on the implied frozenness of time, Humbert is aware that the passage of time is outside of his control, and, more importantly, has an undesirable effect on corporeal, nymphic beauty. He notes that "I also knew she would not be forever Lolita. ... In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a "young girl", and then, into a "college girl" – that horror of horrors," (72) implying that her allure as a nymphet fades with time. Thus, I suggest that while Humbert is enthralled by Dolores' physical attributes that remind him of Annabel, his longing for his childhood Riviera love lingers in his need for Lolita to encompass the entirety of his perception of Annabel, both physically and abstractly. While nymphic beauty tends to be corrupted by time, it is the abstract aura of the nymphet that remains pure and unadulterated. For Humbert, that aura is maintained through his and Annabel's spiritual connection: he asserts that "the spiritual and the physical had been blended in us with a perfection ... Long after her death I felt her thoughts float through mine. Long before we met we had the same dreams. We found strange affinities" (12). Thus, despite her physical demise, Humbert's bond with Annabel is not severed, but preserved at an incorporeal level, as a result of which, he succeeds in capturing her essence,

which he then seeks to embody by “incarnating her in another” (14). Nevertheless, Humbert’s longing for any semblance of a connection with Annabel is prolonged by his failure to achieve her total incarnation in Dolores. Besides Lolita’s disagreeable temper and her physical transition into maturity, which contrasts with Annabel’s stoicism and untampered childish beauty, Humbert also laments the absence of an imagined abstract connection he has shared with Annabel: “Oh, Lolita, had *you* loved me thus!” (13). This exclamation reveals his awareness that Lolita is not actually Annabel, and that time cannot be mended by substituting her for his childhood beloved.

However, I suggest that for Humbert to reconcile with the truth that Annabel exists solely in his memories and cannot be incarnated in Dolores, or any other nymphet, means to acknowledge her death and reexperience his consequent trauma of loss. Stephen Legg in his discussion on “Memory and Nostalgia” observes that while both trauma and nostalgia are closely connected in their relation to the past, “nostalgia often focuses on a time and place before or beyond a traumatic incident” (Legg 103). Thus, Humbert’s nostalgia thrives in selective memories of his childhood, in “details and memorial signs,” (Boym 49) such as Annabel’s physical appearance or her essence, prior to her traumatic death. Annabel, then, is frozen in his memory, unalterable by any events that follow a chronological passage of time. What Legg’s observation also suggests is that while nostalgia lingers in the past, trauma is denoted precisely by its inability to reconcile with it. Humbert’s incapability to confront Annabel’s death puts him in a precarious position: while his nostalgia is driven by a longing for his past, his trauma prevents him from accessing it and recollecting it truthfully.

Moreover, I view Humbert’s longing for *the* Annabel of his childhood as a longing for a time before trauma. Since he cannot cross the threshold of his past trauma, what he longs for instead is to freeze the time prior to the traumatic event of her death. Therefore, for him Annabel functions as a reference point, a lighthouse, that guides him on a path to a desired past. Similar to Poe’s narrator, Humbert bemoans the loss of his beloved. However, while Poe’s poetic “I” acknowledges the traumatic loss and resigns himself to “lie down by the side / Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride,” (Poe) Humbert negates his trauma, which results in his never-ending quest to find Annabel’s replica. For to incarnate her in another physical being is to also “incarnate” his past prior to trauma, to give it legitimacy and validate it, and it is this unattainable wish that ultimately informs his longing for Annabel.

3.6 Chapter Summary

To sum up, this chapter has primarily focused on disclosing the nostalgia that informs, and is informed by, Humbert's discourse. With Boym's observations on restorative and reflective nostalgia in mind, this chapter has focused on two aspects of Humbert's narrative. The first part has covered Humbert's nostalgia lingering in his desire to return to the imagined home of Hotel Mirana, as well as his search for the aura of his childhood home in different hotels he inhabits with Lolita. The second part has analysed Humbert's nostalgia in regard to his physical loss of Dolores, and has suggested that it is this loss in particular that encourages him to recount and immortalize his memories of her in the form of writing. Finally, the chapter has presented Annabel as the underlying figure of Humbert's nostalgia, and has discussed his longing for a disrupted connection with her, as well as his yearning to reconnect with his past prior to her death.

4 Chapter Three: Humbert Humbert on Melancholy

“JAQUES: I have neither the scholar’s melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician’s, which is fantastical; nor the courtier’s, which is proud; nor the soldier’s, which is ambitious; nor the lawyer’s, which is politic; nor the lady’s, which is nice; nor the lover’s, which is all these; but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects [...]”

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ACT 4, SC. 1, V.13-20.

With these words Lord Jaques addresses Rosalind, a daughter of an exiled Duke Senior, in William Shakespeare’s pastoral comedy *As You Like It* (1599). Melancholy Jaques, as he is sometimes referred to in the play, contemplates the meaning of melancholy, observing that its function and attributes vary with each individual. As mentioned in the introduction to the present thesis, melancholy is indeed a complex notion: it denotes a multitude of physical ailments, as well as an array of emotional states – it is a bodily ailment, but also “a depression of spirits [and] a pensive mood” (“Melancholy,” *Merriam-Webster*). The complexity of the term is further complicated by positive and negative qualities attributed to it. In their article on “Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion,” Emily Brady and Arto Haapala distinguish between the displeasurable and pleasurable shades of melancholy, where displeasurable aspects “lie in feelings of loneliness, emptiness, sadness from loss, and the fear or dread,” (Brady and Haapala 7) while pleasurable come “through reflection, where we dwell on happy memories or fashion elaborate fantasies” (*ibid.*). In other words, melancholy lingers in grief and sadness, but also in pleasant memories and imaginations.

In this chapter melancholy is distinguished from nostalgia by means of its source: while nostalgia thrives in Humbert’s memories, I suggest that melancholy prospers in his imagination. Memory and imagination appear to represent two sides of the same coin, as remarked by Thomas Hobbes in his seminal work on man and commonwealth *Leviathan* (1651): “Imagination and memory are but one thing, which for diverse considerations hath diverse names” (Hobbes 12). Likewise, Benjamin Tucker paraphrases Hobbes to emphasize that both imagination and memory are “products of past experience” (Tucker 12). Although, for Hobbes, the difference between the two notions is marginal, he nevertheless observes that in contrast to memory, imagination is “but a fiction of the mind” (Hobbes 12) – meaning that imagination partakes in fantasy. In a similar manner, Brady and Haapala point out that while

imagination begins in memories, it “may become so fanciful that memories are altogether left behind; they exist merely as the starting point of the fantasy” (Brady and Haapala 5). In this chapter, I suggest that for Humbert melancholy is closely linked to his imagination, and it is often those memories which he remembers that are frequently obfuscated by his fantasies. In order to understand how melancholy functions in Humbert’s discourse, the first part of the chapter contextualizes melancholy and discusses Humbert’s own use of the term, and then examines his melancholic reproach of the self. This part is concerned with disclosing melancholy thresholds that occasion Humbert’s narrative. Meanwhile, the second part focuses on the reflective nature of melancholy, in addition to discussing Humbert’s “imaginative reflection,” (ibid.) where his imagination “extends memories in a way that deepens reflection, and in turn this deepens the feeling [of melancholy]” (ibid.).

4.1 Melancholy Contexts in Humbert’s Discourse

In the beginning of his memoir, Humbert distinguishes himself from “a normal man” (Nabokov 16) by asserting that only “an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy” (ibid.) is capable of differentiating between ordinary young girls and nymphets. In this observation, Humbert amalgamates artistic creativity (and its positive connotations) with madness (and its negative ones), both of which anticipate a melancholy mood. Similarly, in her article on madness, mania, and melancholy, Diane Karp points out that melancholy (and madness) assumes positive, as well as negative features. Within the context of her discussion on medieval art, Karp distinguishes melancholy as, on one hand, denoting a possession by a demon or a devil, and, on the other, a possession by a creative muse. She further suggests that it is “often the hold of the muse, the creative demon, [that] manifested itself as melancholy” (Karp 6). Therefore, Karp explains, “it was very much in vogue for the artist, as a man of genius, to manifest melancholy” (7). Likewise, Humbert asserts his status both as a wicked madman and a creative genius under the umbrella of melancholy. Consequently, in his view, “an artist” and “a madman” equals “a creature of infinite melancholy”. He prefaces this remark with a detailed account of nymphets, describing their physical allure, as well as their “demoniac” (Nabokov 15) nature. Their double nature – demoniac, as well as creative – corresponds with his own duality: he presents himself as a creative artist inspired by nymphets and a madman possessed by them, implying that, at least to some extent, his melancholy is elicited by forces outside of his control.

For Humbert, melancholy seems to engender different meanings, depending on the circumstances that evoke it. For instance, I suggest that his abuse of Lolita at The Enchanted Hunters hotel, shrouded by his fairytalelike and enchanting discourse, evokes melancholy as a romantic sentiment akin to a romantic sensibility. Susan Manning describes *sensibility* as “a transitional phase of mid eighteenth-century writing, between the decline of neo-classical ‘Reason’ and the eruption of Romantic ‘Imagination’” (Manning 81) and identifies its characteristic features as those with “a focus on emotional response and somatized reactions (tears, swoons, deathly pallor), [and] a prevailing mood of melancholy” (ibid). Similarly, in his discussion of melancholy in the poetry of John Keats, James J. Zigerell paraphrases Robert Burton’s observations in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) by recognizing that “melancholy is a state which haunts the sensitized spirit,” (Zigerell 3) and thus “it is by means of the intuitive faculties of emotional man that truth and beauty are glimpsed” (4).

With these observations in mind, I suggest that Humbert’s attempts to instigate a physical relationship with Lolita at The Enchanted Hunters hotel elicit a similar aura of melancholic sensibility. While Dolores is in a state of haze induced by sleeping pills administered to her by Humbert, he too appears to be entranced in an identical manner: “A breeze from wonderland had begun to affect my thoughts, and now they seemed couched in italics,” (Nabokov 148) he contends. Throughout the memoir, Humbert conceals certain words and phrases by means of italics, and unless one is familiar with their language, their true meaning escapes comprehension. Similarly, at this moment, Humbert’s thoughts are “couched in italics”, implying a certain foreignness to his manner of thinking, and, thus, only those familiar with his predicament are able to decipher the “truth and beauty” behind them. Meanwhile, Humbert continues, “time and again my consciousness folded the wrong way, my shuffling body entered the sphere of sleep, shuffled out again, and ... I caught myself drifting into a melancholy snore” (ibid.). In other words, what this alludes to is that Humbert’s discourse attempts to place him in a similar position to that of Dolores, insinuating that they are both deliriously hazed. However, Lolita’s artificially produced delirium contradicts Humbert’s. To recall Manning’s somatized reactions (tears, swoons, or deathly pallor), it becomes evident that the closer Humbert gets to embracing Dolores, the more nervous and tense he becomes. For instance, at the moment of a failed attempt of embracing Lolita, his deathly pallor becomes exacerbated by “a fit of heartburn” (146) and dyspepsia (indigestion). Such physical response mimics Humbert’s emotional distress - of finally being

near Lolita but unable to satisfy his desires – and thus, he inadvertently reveals that his “delirium” is provoked by his sensibility.

It is also important to note that, in this instance, Humbert’s poetic discourse obfuscates his abusive conduct and instead presents it as romantic. Under the guise of melancholy, he ponders at the “beauty” of their first physical contact, simultaneously neglecting to account for Lolita’s actual experiences. He presents himself as the “emotional man” and a “sensitized spirit” (qualities pointed out by Zigerell) through whom the “beauty” and “truth” are communicated to the outside world. Similar to writers of the Romantic era, Humbert values “feeling over reason, [and] tension over balance” (Sullivan 885); hence, this “intuitive feeling” (Zigerell 4) with which he narrates the act is based on what he *feels* to be true not what actually *is*. In this manner, Humbert imitates William Wordsworth’s “Man of Feeling,” a man “endued with *more* lively sensibility, *more* enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a *greater* knowledge of human nature, and a *more* comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (Manning 94). Manning further notes that “[Wordsworth’s] poet produces pleasure by his ability to provoke a reader’s natural, sympathetic responses to shared human experience” (ibid.). Similarly, Humbert appeals to his readers to sympathize with his “plight”: “Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages!” (Nabokov 146). Clearly, Humbert’s “experience” of attraction to young girls, and his consequent abuse of Dolores, is far from a “shared human experience” remarked upon by Manning. Nevertheless, Humbert pleads difference “of the poet’s sensibilities from those of his audience” (Manning ibid.) – in other words, he rationalizes his behaviour by insinuating that his own sensibility is greater than that of his readership. Despite addressing his audience in this scene, Humbert is, at least subconsciously, aware of his failure to evoke “impartial sympathy” (Nabokov 63). Thus, “when he does not ‘find’ the necessary sympathetic emotions in the world beyond himself, he is ‘habitually impelled to *create*’ them within the magic circle of his own self” (Manning ibid.). In short, Humbert, by writing a memoir, “creates” a sympathetic monument to his own suffering because he lacks such sympathy from the outside. Consequently, according to Manning, it is “when sympathy turns to find its responses within, [that] aesthetics can become an entirely singular affair” (ibid.). I suggest that for this reason Humbert embellishes his abuse in aesthetic imagery. When at the end of his chapter, he “thinks up” of a mural of his own making, where concealed by the beauty of “poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday” (Nabokov 152) among other things is an image of “a

wincing child,” (ibid.) it is an eerie reminder of his mistreatment of Dolores, veiled in a language of melancholy sensibility.

Furthermore, Humbert views melancholy as both a malady of and a remedy for his suffering. It manifests itself in physical ailments – in fits and frenzies, stomach aches, and fears – but also in the form of a cure. Following their final meeting, Humbert reflects on his relationship with Dolores and his inability to “make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her,” (Nabokov 322) and concludes that “I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (ibid.). As observed by Brookbanks in his discussion on gendered melancholy, Humbert is more preoccupied with “a local palliative for *his* misery” (Brookbanks 9) than acknowledging the suffering he has inflicted on Dolores. Thus, for him, “melancholy art helps ... to defy his localized anxiety over the sense that life (i.e., his experience with Dolly) might be a purposeless joke” (10). In other words, melancholy allows Humbert to find meaning in his otherwise “purposeless” and senseless abuse of Lolita. For him, it functions as a remedy to combat his life as “a purposeless joke” – it is a cure that makes sense of his otherwise abhorrent conduct. Moreover, I suggest that his inclination towards palliative methods of treatment (melancholy and art), instead of curative ones, indicates that while he is concerned with a relief of his suffering, he is not necessarily eager to address the underlying cause of it - he dwells in and reflects on his misery rather than actually working through it.

4.2 Humbert’s Freudian Reproach of the Self

In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud elaborates on characteristic traits of a melancholic, and points out how those traits emerge in the form of a language the melancholic uses to present himself to the world: “The [melancholic] patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished” (Freud 246); meaning that his perception of self, of his own ego, has become “poor and empty” (ibid.). He is also “not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him, but extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better” (ibid.) - in other words, he is, and has always been, morally inferior to others. As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, this chapter is neither concerned with ascribing melancholic traits to Humbert Humbert, nor comparing them with Freud’s view of a melancholic. However, in order to understand how melancholy obfuscates

Humbert's discourse it is important to discuss the circumstances in his narrative under which such descriptions of the self as observed by Freud arise.

In certain moments in his narrative, Humbert abandons proclamations of his innate goodness and innocence, and instead berates and vilifies himself in a similar manner to the Freudian melancholic. He admits that he harbours a monstrous and despicable nature, claiming that "I was a pentapod monster, ... I was despicable and brutal, and turpid," (Nabokov 324) while, at the same time, concealing "a cesspool of rotting monsters behind his [Humbert's] slow boyish smile" (48). However, such moments are rare and scarce. In his discussion on morality of *Lolita*, Martin Green observes that while "Humbert criticizes himself, indeed hates himself ... [it] may perhaps escape our attention at first reading" (Green 368). Green points out that it is because Humbert's "expression [of self-criticism] is most often unobtrusively placed in the narrative" (ibid.) that it becomes difficult to grasp. Green attributes such unobtrusiveness to "an involvement of the reader with the hero [Humbert], a binding together of the two" (369), as a result of which "we [readers] are unable to dissociate ourselves from him self-righteously, because he represents a part of ourselves we are normally proud of" (ibid.) such as his intelligence or his capability to love Lolita.

To an extent, I agree with Green's arguments on Humbert's expression of self-reproach. However, I also suggest that melancholy is critical in understanding Humbert's self-criticism, in particular the manner in which it appears unobtrusive in his discourse. In my view, where Freud's melancholic openly reproaches himself to others, Humbert obfuscates his reproach by means of reflection. Brady and Haapala view reflection as a "state[s] of mind often associated with the aesthetic response" (Brady and Haapala 4) and a "melancholy's most distinctive aspect" (ibid.). For Brady and Haapala, reflection implies a certain aesthetic reaction to an aesthetic situation; yet it is too broad of a term to engender only one meaning. Thus, within the context of this thesis, I view reflection as a manner of dwelling *in*. Akin to Boym's reflective nostalgia which "dwells in fantasies of past homelands," (Boym 113) I suggest that Humbert's melancholy reflection dwells in fantasies of his past memories. Disguised by the aesthetics of his language, Humbert's self-reproach becomes indistinguishable from his intricate recollections of the past, particularly, when he immediately counteracts it with "but I loved you. ... *mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais!*"¹⁸

¹⁸ From French, meaning "but I loved you, I loved you".

(Nabokov 324) echoing Green's remarks on Humbert's identification with his audience by means of invoking proclamations of love.

In contrast to the Freudian melancholic who exhibits "an emotional state of resignation" (Brady and Haapala 3) similar to depression, where "he really is as lacking in interest and as incapable of love and achievement as he says," (Freud 246) Humbert basks in, what I suggest is, "the pleasure of reflection and contemplation of things [he] love[s] and long[s] for" (Brady and Haapala *ibid.*). Reflection, this dwelling in the fantasies of his past, allows him to derive pleasure where Freudian melancholic finds only desperation. Brady and Haapala note that one distinct aspect of melancholy is the emergence of the positive feeling despite the loss; they describe this feeling as "the self-indulgent, almost narcissistic pleasure," (6) which, according to them, "is a felt feature of the emotion [of melancholy]" (*ibid.*). Similarly, as Humbert reflects on his past memories in his memoir, such as his loss of Lolita, instead of despairing, he finds pleasure in elaborate fantasies that he shrouds those memories in. Thus, it is melancholy that allows him to linger in those moments, to prolong them, and, in turn, to extend the pleasure he derives from reflecting on them.

Moreover, it is curious that while his self-criticism is directed towards Lolita, perhaps echoing her own sentiments of his monstrous nature, he never actually vocalizes them to her – his observations exist solely within the parentheses of his memoir. Humbert's resolve to prevent Lolita from witnessing his self-reproach suggests that unlike the Freudian melancholic, he refrains from abasing himself before everyone in order to reveal a certain truth about his character (Freud *ibid.*). Rather, he employs melancholy as an emotion that permits him to access and connect with the absent object (Dolores) and indirectly experience it "through memories, thoughts or imaginings" (Brady and Haapala 4). In other words, where Freudian melancholy is destructive in a way that it emphasizes the impoverishment of the ego, for Humbert, melancholy functions as a direct link to the lost object, which he experiences through complex fantasies; and this, in turn, provides him with a self-indulgent and narcissistic type of pleasure.

4.3 Humbert and the Reflective Nature of Melancholy

In their discussion on melancholy, Brady and Haapala point out that while melancholy "shares a family resemblance with love, longing, yearning or missing something, as well as feeling nostalgic," (*ibid.*) it is distinguished from such emotions through the aforementioned reflection, and that "rather than being an immediate response to some object that is present to

perception, melancholy most often involves reflection on or contemplation of a memory of a person, state, event, or state of affairs” (ibid.). As mentioned before, Humbert’s memoir is essentially a recollection of and a contemplation on his past memories. While some of them are detailed and intact (such as when he recounts physical aspects of his relationship with Dolores), others appear to be less vivid (such as the loss of his mother). The reflective aspect of melancholy, according to Brady and Haapala, “often involves the effort of recollection, that is, the reflection necessary for retrieving memories that are faint and sketchy” (ibid.). In other words, reflection is critical in reconstructing such memories that are obscure and vague. In the first chapter of the present thesis, I have briefly discussed Humbert’s trauma in relation to the death of his mother, and how his memory of her is constricted by the parentheses of “(picnic, lightning)” (Nabokov 8). I have suggested then that this signifies the unspeakability of Humbert’s own extreme trauma. Within the context of discussion on melancholy, this particular scene reveals another aspect of Humbert’s narrative, occasioned by the reflective nature of melancholy.

Almost at the end of his memoir, Humbert recounts the memory of his mother: “My mother, in a livid wet dress, under the tumbling mist (so I vividly imagined her), had run panting ecstatically up that ridge above Moulinet to be felled there by a thunderbolt” (327). In contrast to his brief description of her death in the beginning, Humbert gives a more detailed account of the traumatic occurrence: in addition to describing the final moments before her tragic demise, he “imagines” his mother’s physical appearance. In my view, Humbert “imagines” his mother and, in a certain manner, vocalizes the circumstances surrounding her death mainly because he reflects on this particular incident. When his mother is “felled by a thunderbolt,” Humbert is a mere child, and thus he lacks the memory of her. Similarly, in her discussion of *Lolita* as an autobiography, Anna Morlan observes that Humbert’s description of his mother as “very photogenic” (8) implies that “he can only comment on her presence in his photographs,” (Morlan 3) and that “he has no cache of his own perceptions from which to reinvent her” (ibid.). I suggest that as a result of this insufficiency, he “constructs” memories of his mother by reflecting on – imagining - the traumatizing scene of her death. However true, “faint” or “sketchy” this reflection is, it allows him to verify her as an actual presence in his life, not only a figure in a photograph. What I find curious is that this reflection occurs in the final chapters of his memoir. It is as though as he is nearing the end of his story, Humbert, almost subconsciously, attempts to return to its beginning, so that he can perpetuate the continuity of his narrative.

Furthermore, Humbert observes that this reflection on the memory of his mother is provoked by Lolita's enunciation of her own misery regarding Charlotte's death, which leads him to conclude that his mistreatment of Dolores is, to some extent, rooted in "my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self" (Nabokov 327). In an effort to rationalize his abusive conduct he reveals that his ignorance of Dolores' feelings inadvertently stems from the premature death of his own mother, which clarifies why "no yearnings of the accepted kind could I ever graft upon any moment of my youth" (ibid.). Humbert's reflection on this particular memory not only "reinvents" his mother as a tangible presence in his life, but also hints at his inability to cope with her death, which in turn restricts his capacity to commiserate with Lolita. However, I suggest that this evocation of the memory of his mother functions not to "absolve" or justify him, but rather to disclose a pleasurable aspect of melancholy - a countermeasure to his traumatic experience of her death. Instead of indulging in the feelings of sadness at his loss, Humbert reflects on it in a calm and pensive manner. One explanation for this is found in Brady and Haapala's remark that "the loss that precipitates sadness must be something that we value" (Brady and Haapala 6). In other words, in order to perceive sadness, the loss must be directly attached to the object of value. However, for Humbert, this loss of his mother fails to anticipate feelings of sadness because "nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory" (Nabokov 8). As mentioned above, she exists solely because he reinvents her through reflection. Thus, for him, this recollection of her death produces the aforementioned "self-indulgent, almost narcissistic pleasure", discussed by Brady and Haapala in their article: he thrives in the pensive feeling it produces.

In addition, Brady and Haapala remark that the reflective nature of melancholy requires solitude for the retrieval of faint memories. They suggest that it is "the solitary state of mind that accompanies melancholy and facilitates the attention needed for such retrieval" (Brady and Haapala 4). In a certain manner, Humbert's physical confinement allows for an emergence of such a solitary state of mind. "This tombal jail" (Nabokov 123) that he inhabits isolates him from the outside world and functions as a physical site of reflection. However, at first, Humbert's appreciation of solitude is obfuscated by negative connotations attributed to it. Shortly after Lolita's escape, he takes on a role of a lone wanderer, and it is in this loneliness that he finds his solitude unbearable. "Solitude was corrupting me. I needed company and care," (293) he asserts. As a free man, Humbert chooses the company of Rita, a temporary substitute for Dolores, to spare him such corruption. Yet, following his murder of

Quilty, he becomes separated from others by physical boundaries. As a result, Humbert is compelled to reconsider his view on solitude. I suggest that in prison he attempts to reconcile with feelings of solitude by merging them with his reflections – with his fantasies and imaginations – that provide him with a source of pleasure. While Humbert may not consciously seek out solitude as a means of prolonging his melancholy state, he embraces it in the form of writing. In his memoir, he compiles memories, as well as his reflections on them, and, through solitude, he indulges in such recollections that elicit melancholy. According to Brady and Haapala, it is precisely this mixture of solitude and contemplative state that brings forth a melancholy mood.

4.4 Humbert's Discourse on Melancholy and Imagination

For Humbert, imagination constitutes an integral part of his memoir. He remarks that “when I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives” (12). Humbert's retrospective imagination takes root in his past memories and allows him to “fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past,” (ibid.) meaning that it empowers him to re-think, and, to a degree, re-make meaning of his complicated past. Brady and Haapala view imagination as an essential component of melancholy with a distinct role attributed to it. They remark that “first, imagination makes associations between a present and past experience, and in this sense it has a role in causing melancholy,” (Brady and Haapala ibid.) and “secondly, imagination is used to embellish or fantasize around the memories of melancholy (ibid.)” and it can become “so fanciful that memories are altogether left behind; they exist merely as the starting point of fantasy which may even border on delusion” (ibid.). I suggest that the causative function of imagination in melancholy, which links past with present, is evident in Humbert's early comparisons of Lolita with Annabel; meanwhile, the imagination that surrounds his melancholy memories of their (Humbert and Lolita's) shared past inadvertently leads him to abandon his actual memories in stead of the imagined ones.

As previously discussed in the thesis, Annabel is a key figure in Humbert's narrative: she is a direct link to his childhood, and he moulds his present relationships with her image in mind. He desperately seeks out and clings to minutiae objects in the present that, adorned by his imagination, transport him to the time of their (Humbert and Annabel's) common past. Jeffery A. Triggs points to such desperation in his discussion of the nature and function of the

two parts in *Lolita*. He exemplifies this despair by remarking on Humbert's first meeting with Dolores: "When he [Humbert] first sees her, she is wearing a pair of dark sunglasses not unlike the pair left on the beach when Humbert and Annabel made their last, desperate attempt at a tryst" (Triggs 4). A pair of dark sunglasses, "a blue sea-wave [that] swelled under my [Humbert's] heart," (Nabokov 41) and Lolita's innocent, childish appearance, are all reminiscent of "the last immortal day behind the 'Roches Roses'" (42) with Annabel. In this moment, Hobbes' "fiction of the mind" connects a *detail* of the present with the *feeling* of the past. I suggest that when Humbert discovers physical similarities between Dolores and Annabel (the same shoulders, the same bare back, the same chestnut hair) it is not their likeness that he aches for, but the feelings that such details elicit in him. Thus, what his imagination attempts to reconstruct in the present is the feeling of the moment of the past – the adolescent anticipation of a physical connection; however, this time, with a more satisfactory outcome.

According to Triggs, this particular scene emphasizes that, for Humbert, Lolita exists "not so much as an independent character, but as a catalyst and prisoner of Humbert's imagination, fitted in his mind to the Platonic ideal suggested by Annabel" (Triggs 4). Indeed, Humbert fails to see Dolores as a separate figure inhabiting the present. Rather, he "recognizes" and "sees again" (Nabokov *ibid.*) Annabel frozen in that immortal moment of the past. Beci Dobbin in her article on first and second encounters in *Lolita* correctly infers that "when Humbert sees Lolita for the first time he *imagines* himself to be seeing Annabel for the second time" (Dobbin, *emphasis added*, par. 4). Initially, Humbert rejoices at his rediscovery of Annabel within Dolores: it is "with awe and delight" (Nabokov 42) that he welcomes "that impact of passionate recognition" (*ibid.*). However, what he fails to account for is that such an association of past and present by means of imagination evokes feelings of melancholy. Thus, his initial pleasure at retrieving Annabel is soon replaced by a disappointment at Lolita's incompetence to conform to his imagined ideal. "Oh, Lolita, had *you* loved me thus!" (13), he laments, remembering "the spiritual and the physical" (12) connection he shared with Annabel in the past, strikingly missing from his present relationship with Dolores. As a result, in his memoir Humbert frequently resorts to wishful thinking: by means of imagination, he reflects on (dwells in) melancholy moments and reimagines them, at the same time prolonging those moments to the extent that actual memories become irrelevant – it is the fantasy that takes the spotlight.

One such memory that Humbert considerably embellishes with imagination is his first sexual encounter with Lolita at The Enchanted Hunters hotel. In his mind, the recollection of what essentially is an abduction and drugging of an orphaned child becomes a memory of a “stark act of love,” (151) where “the enchanted prey was about to meet halfway the enchanted hunter” (148). In my view, it is because, for him, this memory demonstrates Lolita’s willingness to participate in their mutual play at love: “It was she who seduced me” (150) and it is she who instigates their first kiss. Thus, the fantasy at the root of this memory lies in Humbert’s need to maintain that Dolores is inclined to engage in a physical act with him of her own will. In turn, this allows him to continue exploiting her body because, in his view, the imagined consent in this particular instance presupposes (and justifies) future sexual encounters with her. Hence, Humbert imagines this memory to fit his narrative of mutual love and affection, and the delusion he maintains at her eagerness to engage with him sustains the entirety of his memoir. Here, he makes use of this memory as a starting point for a fantasy that his and Lolita’s is a love story, not a cautionary tale, echoing Brady and Haapala’s observation that in melancholy “imagination may become so fanciful that memories are altogether left behind” (Brady and Haapala 5) – in other words, Humbert’s melancholy lingers not in the memory itself but in his imagination of it. By writing a memoir, he meditates on the pleasure this fanciful memory evokes in him, and he derives such pleasure not only from the physical encounter (which, according to his description of it, is rather awkward) but also from getting closer to his principal aim “to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (Nabokov 151).

Overall, many of Humbert’s memories of Lolita are, more or less, adorned by his imagination, mostly because he views her as an imagined magical creature rather than an autonomous human being. He projects his own fantasy of a fey, magical nymphet on Dolores to such an extent that her own identity becomes obsolete. He conflates her image with that of “the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm” (16) of a nymphet, consciously overlooking attributes and behaviours that fail to conform to his fantasies. Thus, his memory of Dolores as an ordinary child is substituted by his imagination of her as Lolita - a nymphet. In his article on the non-existence of Lolita, Colin McGinn makes a similar observation. He points out that for Humbert Lolita “is a projection of his fantasies not an objective human type” (McGinn 2019, par. 2). McGinn further argues that the elusive manner in which Humbert describes his mythical nymphet exemplifies “that there is no such thing as a nymphet – no human girl falls into the category as a matter of objective fact” (ibid.). Indeed,

Humbert's insistence that it is only through the eyes of "an artist and a madman" (Nabokov 16) that such creatures are distinguished suggests that their existence is contained within the imaginary faculties of the creative madman, that is, within his own imagination. McGinn sums up his point by observing that "if a bewitched traveler discerns one [nymphet] in a group that is only because he projects his fantasies onto her: the object of his fantasy does not really exist" (McGinn 2019, par. 2). However, he is quick to remark that despite the absence of such imagined nymphic creatures, their "real-world counterpart[s]" (ibid.) do exist; and for Humbert, it is Dolores that embodies such a creature. "She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita," (Nabokov 7) he asserts in the beginning of his memoir. As a figment of his "imagination superimposed on the actual girl" (McGinn 2019, par. 3), Lolita – a nymphet - exists only *to* Humbert and solely *for* his own pleasure.

However, even in this fantasy, Humbert is aware of the fleeting lifespan of nymphets. For him, they exist within the boundaries of nine and fourteen years, after which they disappear from nympholept's field of vision. Thus, he is constantly reminded of Dolores' fragility to embody a nymphet: "I also knew that she would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1. In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet" (Nabokov 72) - in short, as McGinn comments, "nymphets come and go quickly" (McGinn 2019, par. 4). Here, I suggest that through his memoir, Humbert attempts to alleviate the suffering of such a realization. In writing, he allows Lolita to be suspended in time, forever within the limits of the imagined, perfect age of a nymphet, and, in turn, immortal. "And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (Nabokov 352), he concludes. In this memoir, Humbert not only "dwell[s] in happy memories," (Brady and Haapala 7) but also "fashion[s] elaborate fantasies" (ibid.); and, in my view, it is through these fanciful imaginations that he obtains the utmost narcissistic pleasure, which he prolongs by means of melancholy.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has been primarily concerned with the notion of melancholy in Humbert's discourse, and has argued that his melancholy is pervasive in his imaginative reflections on past memories. In order to disclose melancholy thresholds in Humbert's narrative, the first part of the chapter has focused on Humbert's own use of the term in his memoir, and then has examined his melancholic reproach of the self. Meanwhile, the second part has analysed Humbert's discourse on the reflective nature of melancholy, in addition to discussing his own

imagination, and argued that it is through imagination that he extends his memories and, in turn, intensifies the feeling of melancholy.

5 Conclusion

Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel still haunts its readers some sixty-seven years after its publication. From music, to fashion, to new ways of rethinking the novel vis-à-vis contemporary movements,¹⁹ *Lolita* remains an alluring presence in modern consciousness. In her article on how *Lolita* continues to seduce its audience after all this time, Caitlin Flanagan reiterates the contemporary sentiment that Nabokov's *Lolita* "depends on the combination of revulsion and ecstasy that it engenders in its readers" (Flanagan 2018, par. 14) and that "the revulsion is why it endures ... as a book that shakes its readers, no matter how modern" (ibid.). Indeed, since its release the novel faced backlash for its "abnormal and decadent" (Lawrenson 80) subject matter that occasioned public repulsion and disgust. Yet, at the same time, it charmed its readers with eloquent language and aesthetic imagery. Not much has changed since then – the readers of the novel continue to be shocked by its transgressive content, and, at the same time, find themselves enchanted by its aesthetics. Personally, I attribute *Lolita*'s "seduction" and its continued relevance in modern culture to the abundance of themes and symbols divulged upon each reading of the novel. Prior to writing this thesis, I have always approached *Lolita* from a moral standpoint, looking for examples of moral and ethical transgressions in it. However, I have soon realized that each re-reading of the novel has disclosed a new way of interpreting its content, and revealed themes I have not considered before. With this observation in mind, I have recalled Nabokov's comments on how one should approach any novel. According to him, "you do not read, you reread" (Nordstrom 43) or "re-reread a novel" (Hayman 77) in order to grasp the full complexity of the work of art. The present thesis exemplifies one such re-reading of *Lolita*. In it, I have emphasized what I have found to be of interest for my analysis, namely traumatic thresholds that inform, and are informed by, Humbert Humbert's discourse, particularly those that relate to trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy. I have built my analysis on existing literary criticism and have ventured further to suggest, what I hope is, a distinct interpretation of Nabokov's novel.

In its discussion of trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy in *Lolita*, the present thesis has pointed out the insufficiency of critical readings and interpretations concerned with these three phenomena: while trauma is often examined in regard to Dolores' character and

¹⁹ Here, I am referring to a recently published (2021) book *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita in the #MeToo Era*, edited by Elena Rakhimova-Sommers, which tackles such challenging questions as why and how to teach about *Lolita* with the #MeToo movement in mind.

Humbert is frequently viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis, nostalgia, and melancholy, on the other hand, are chiefly overlooked. I consider such lack of conversation surrounding these three notions in *Lolita* disheartening, particularly because, in my view, trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy allow for an interesting approach to Humbert Humbert's character. In regard to trauma, I have suggested that the perpetrator trauma proposes a new approach to understanding Humbert Humbert. In its scrutiny of him as both an abuser and a traumatized subject, the perpetrator trauma reveals a new manner of thinking about Humbert – not only as a morally degenerate nympholept, but also a traumatized protagonist – which requires further research. Similarly, nostalgia and melancholy warrant a more thorough examination, as those two notions suggest a set of original motivations for Humbert's conduct in the novel and point to a yet unexplored connection between nostalgia and memory, and melancholy and imagination, regarding his memoir. The present thesis is limited by its scope, and thus has only breached the surface of what trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy offer in regard to the study of Humbert's character and, by extension, to other protagonists of Nabokov's works.²⁰ What is more, in this thesis I have been mainly concerned with Humbert's discourse of what is *said* in his memoir, that is, what he consciously reveals by means of language, no matter how elusive or vague. However, further research may consider what remains *unsaid* in the novel, namely, what is disclosed through Humbert's nightly terrors and vivid dreams that hint at something subconsciously repressed within him. I suggest that viewed through the lens of trauma, nostalgia, and melancholy, such additional analysis is imperative to grasp the full complexity of Humbert Humbert's character, so masterfully created by Nabokov.

Despite Nabokov's insistence on the death of *Lolita*, the present thesis hopes to continue the conversation about the novel. Considering what has already been written about Nabokov's eloquent masterpiece, I suggest that there is still more to be discovered and uncovered – it is a Nabokovian puzzle that is yet to be finished.

²⁰ One other character that immediately comes to mind is Timofey Pnin from Nabokov's novel *Pnin* (1957), where Timofey, a professor of Russian language teaching at the Waindell College in the US, struggles with his own confrontation with trauma of exile, and, for the most part, dwells in nostalgic memories of his past.

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